Race Matters: People of Color, Ideology, and the Politics of Erasure and Reversal in Ursula Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* and Mary Doria Russell's *The Sparrow*

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Although many mainstream SF writers have contributed significantly to the redefinition and celebration of Otherness in their speculations about otherworldly forms of difference, what Gene Roddenberry's Mr. Spock calls "infinite diversity in infinite combinations" (IDIC), these writers have done little to draw attention to the material conditions of oppression and the struggles of minorities with power and privilege in the multicultural United States.[1] Even when the protagonist in mainstream SF literary and cultural production is a person of color, his or her ethnic identity and background are displaced in favor of the postmodern destabilization of the Self/Other binary and the proliferation of difference in the abstract. The well-known African-American SF writer Octavia Butler, for example, notes that

> Science fiction has long treated people who might or might not exist—extraterrestrials. Unfortunately, however, many of the same science fiction writers who started us thinking about the possibility of extraterrestrial life did nothing to make us think about here-at-home variation (sic)—women, blacks, Indians, Asians, Hispanics, etc. (qtd. in Wolmark 28)

For Butler, thinking about the here-and-now (racial politics) is equally as important as speculating about the future (alterity in the abstract). Glorifying the latter, however, mainstream SF writers risk reproducing the same blindspots and limitations of the dominant racial ideology that informs multicultural politics in the U.S. My contention here is that vision and utopia, on which the SF tradition rightfully prides itself, should be nonetheless complemented by a materialist and political critique of contemporary configurations of racial ideology, power, and privilege in the multicultural U.S.

Otherwise, many of the same race discourses and ideologies that engender the language of possibilities and alternatives in SF, including that of extraterrestrial Otherness, will unfortunately reproduce the same cultural representations of the Other that have long disavowed the very existence of that Other. It becomes, therefore, imperative upon scholars to uncover, to use Fredric Jameson's phrase, the "political unconscious" of a text—by which I mean in this case the unrecognizable gaps, the unresolved contradictions, and the hidden ideological assumptions that govern mainstream SF texts in their rewriting of the social reality, in particular, the representation of racial politics. Only by counterbalancing utopia and politics, vision and political engagement, can the SF community and industry go beyond imagining alternative, utopian social relations in the future to transforming the material conditions and political realities that govern these social relations in the present.

This article, then, seeks to unravel the political unconscious of two mainstream SF narratives centered on minority characters: Ursula Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969) and Mary Doria Russell's *The Sparrow* (1996). Writing from different ideological positionings, liberal multiculturalism and postnational discourse respectively, Le Guin and Russell feature a Black man and a Latino (more specifically a Puerto Rican of Taíno descent) who spearhead human missions to alien planets, Gethen/Winter and Rakhat. These two novels, however, invest most of their literary energies reimagining otherworldly forms of difference without paying much attention to the specific histories of oppression and to the cultural memories of survival and resistance of their minority characters. Although they clear a space for the articulation of difference and the repressed voices of the subaltern (ethnic) Other, they neither recognize nor resolve the real contradictions over power and privilege that characterize the contemporary multicultural U.S.

In the political unconscious of these novels, the oppression of minorities in the here and now is denied. These minority protagonists are disassociated from their specific histories of oppression and resistance, and as such, the local ethnic narratives of these characters are turned into signifiers of the universal, human (White Anglo-American) experience. Instead, these texts affirm an alternative form of politics predicated upon integration and synthesis between Self and Other (Le Guin) or mystical union between subject and Subject, humans and God (Russell). At stake here is the production, or interpellation, of subjects not only as individuals but individualists. In her critique of the "subject-constitution of the female individualist" in Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre*, the postcolonial critic Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak argues, via Homi Bhabha's theory of mimicry, that the "female individualist, not-quite/not-male, articulates herself in shifting relationship to what is at stake, the 'native female' as such (*within* discourse, *as* a signifier) is excluded from any share in this emerging norm" (839). Similarly, the minority individual subjects in Le Guin's and Russell's novels, who inhabit a position that is not-quite/not-white, become floating signifiers in an endless array of discursive racial configurations, which eventually leaves them suspended between

otherworldly forms of alterity and current dominant racial typologies, without any share in the human norm.

In what follows, I will interrogate the political unconscious of Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* through two registers: first, the erasure of the importance of the African-American experience in the formation of Anglo-American national identity, what Toni Morrison refers to as the "Africanist presence"; and second, the reproduction of dominant cultural representations of Black men's sexuality in a novel that purports to radically rethink traditional notions of gender and sexual identity. I will also examine the political unconscious of Russell's *The Sparrow* that results from the novel's disavowal of Sandoz's cultural identity as a descendant of the exterminated Taínos and positionality as a Puerto Rican colonial subject under U.S. colonial hegemony. This disavowal is achieved through the production of a post-nationalist discourse which allows Russell first to claim a theory of "radical ignorance" for European colonizers and missionaries which not only affirms their innocence and vindicates them from any malicious intentions but also depoliticizes first encounter narratives through the language of mysticism. Second, it allows Russell to blame the victims for their oppression.

Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness*: The "Africanist Presence," Liberal Multiculturalism, and the Politics of Erasure

Writing in the context of the sexual revolution and civil rights struggle, among other national and global struggles for liberation, Ursula K. Le Guin in *The Left Hand of Darkness* (*LHD*) features a Black emissary, Genly Ai, from the planet Terra (Earth) on a mission to an alien planet, Gethen/Winter, to negotiate the terms of an alliance between the all powerful Ekumen and the Gethenians. The Gethenians are a dark-colored species, whose androgynous sexuality sets them apart from all other worlds colonized and experimented upon by the Hainish Colonizers.[2] The novel unfolds as Genly Ai grapples with the question of the nature of his relationship with one of these Gethenians, Lord Therem Estraven, for there exists an unacknowledged sexual tension between the two. As he comes to terms with his feelings for Estraven, Genly Ai discards his ethnocentric attitudes towards the Gethenian and embraces his radical (sexual) Otherness at the moment of the other's death. Like *LHD*, the impetus of Le Guin's oeuvre in general is to interrogate prevalent Manichean values and practices and to promote visions of wholeness and unity. In "American SF and the Other," for example, Le Guin states,

> If you deny any affinity with another person or kind of person, if you declare it to be wholly different from yourself—as men have done to women, and class has done to class, and nation has done to nation—you may hate it or deify it; but in either case you have denied its spiritual equality and its human reality. You have made it into a thing, to which the only possible relationship is a power relationship. (*Language* 94)

There is much to admire about Le Guin's relentless affirmation of the humanity of the Other as well as its affinities to the "sense of kinship" with the Self. Indeed, no one can deny the important contributions Le Guin has made to the SF canon by interrogating hegemonic representations of Otherness and by refusing to demonize Otherness as either a metaphor of darkness or a signifier of inferiority.[3] Nonetheless, Le Guin refuses to politicize her conceptualization of Otherness and visions of cross-cultural encounters. For example, in the aforementioned article, Le Guin goes on to lambaste other SF writers for projecting the British empire onto their galactic superpowers. It is also worth noting that racial and ethnic differences are glossed over in her brief catalogue of contested identity narratives—she refers to gender, class, and nation, but not to race and ethnicity. The political realities of oppression in *LHD* are displaced in favor of valorizing, as some critics have noted, a Jungian vision of archetypal structures, a mythic collective consciousness and integration.[4] Le Guin, thus, erases racial politics from *LHD* by representing and narrativizing Genly Ai's identity, background, and role as a person, whose subjectivity seems to have been formed outside the hegemonic power structures and systems of representation that have affected the subjects of the Ekumen as well as minorities in this country.

Losing sight of Genly Ai's racialized Otherness, especially the portrayal of his "deviant" sexuality, opens up a gap in *LHD* regarding the history of the appropriation of Blackness in the American literary imagination and American popular culture. In *Playing in the Dark*, for example, Toni Morrison examines the use of blackness and racialized Otherness, what she refers to as "the Africanist presence," in the construction of white American identity and shows that people of African descent are central to the formation of the American literary imagination and the national literary canon. She argues that "the image of reined-in, bound, suppressed and repressed darkness became objectified in American literature as an Africanist persona" (38-39). To understand Le Guin's deployment of Blackness in *LHD* requires re-situating the novel in this particular historical context, for race, racial signifiers as well as racial fantasies are intractable in the construction of sexuality, especially racialized sexualities, in the American popular imaginary. Morrison explains:

> The fabrication of an Africanist persona is reflexive; an extraordinary meditation on the [American] self; a powerful exploration of the fears and desires that reside in the writerly consciousness. . . . What [becomes] transparent [are] the self-evident ways that Americans choose to talk about themselves through and within a sometimes allegorical, sometimes, metaphorical, but always chocked representation of an Africanist presence. (17)

This "chocked representation of an Africanist presence," I argue, forms the political unconscious of *LHD* and can be attributed to the framing of the novel

within the ideological trappings of liberal multiculturalism. As Peter McLaren points out, liberal multiculturalism allows for fetishizing and exoticizing difference, while at the same time assuming natural equality and intellectual sameness among the races. As such, McLaren adds, multiculturalism evacuates difference from any dialectics of power, conflict, and contestation (51). As it essentializes cultural differences and disregards the "historical situatedness of difference," McLaren notes that liberal multiculturalism often collapses "into an ethnocentric and oppressively universalistic humanism in which the legitimating norms which govern the substance of citizenship are identified most strongly with Anglo-American cultural-political communities" (51). The effect of liberal multiculturalism on *LHD* is evident in two narrative registers: first, Blackness is evacuated, especially the African-American experience, from its cultural memory and its foundational narratives. Instead, the Black subject is reframed within the Eurocentric narrative of imperialism as an agent of Empire and as an equal partner to European imperialists. Second, the pernicious stereotypes about Black male sexuality and its pathological image are reproduced in *LHD*, failing thus to resolve the contradictions that emerge in the dominant cultural representations of Black (male) sexuality.

The first omission, or ideological crack, that I see in the expropriation of blackness in *LHD* is the disavowal of not only the African-American cultural memory of survival and resistance to oppression but also the foundational texts of the Middle Passage and captivity (slavery). There is little information given about Genly Ai's origins and past; we know practically nothing of his life before he becomes an agent of the Ekumen, that "clearinghouse for trade and knowledge" (*LHD* 35). What is known about his childhood is that he was practically raised on the Star Ship that brought him to Gethen, an experience that bespeaks of existential loneliness and disconnectedness from any human contact. The spaceship, nonetheless, evokes the chronotope of the ship in the foundational narrative of the Middle Passage in the African diasporic experience. In *The Black Atlantic*, for example, Paul Gilroy clarifies the significance of this chronotope for the African diaspora: "Ships," he writes, "immediately focus attention on the middle passage, on the various projects for redemptive return to an African homeland, on the circulation of ideas and activists as well as the movement of key cultural and political artifacts: tracts, books, gramophone records, and choirs" (4). The importance of this chronotope for the formation of Black identity is submerged in the political unconscious of *LHD*. The slave ship is thus turned into a technologically advanced ship perfectly designed for the luxuries of stasis or hibernation, the absolute opposite of the horrific and traumatic memory of the Middle Passage and the forcible dislocation to which Africans were subjected in the slave trade. In contrast to this erasure of the ship and its cultural mythology in Black consciousness, Octavia Butler, in *Dawn* for example, shows her African-American protagonist, Lilith Iy apo, being held captive on board the living Oankali ship, which constitutes both the space and the instrument of surveillance and oppression.

Furthermore, Genly Ai's life on the Star Ship and his journeys to and on Gethen circumvent questions about the meaning of travel and how one travels as a Black emissary representing the imperial Ekumen. Lisbeth Gant-Britton correctly notes that "By twentieth century Euro-American standards, [Genly] occupies an unprecedented position of power and authority" (36), but she does not interrogate the implication of this positionality within the conventions of travel narratives. While Africans traveled as travelees and objects, Genly Ai is implicated in, and identified with, the imperial gaze of the Ekumen as a traveler. His surname renders him the archetypal ego (the "I"), or in this case the allegorical Every Traveler, who is obviously constructed along the traditional image of the traveler—white, male, and European, for whom traveling bespeaks the privileges of class and missionism (a sense of mission). In this way, Genly Ai resembles Othello: Like the Moor, a product of Venetian militaristic regime, Genly Ai is a "Black [intergalactic] success," to paraphrase Caryl Phillips (45). Like Othello, as Phillips states, Genly Ai has become "what [the Ekumen has] made him into" (46).

What's more, Genly's narrative is framed within the timeline of the Age of Discovery and the Spanish colonization of the Americas. The novel begins with Genly's report dated Ekumenical Year 1490-97, turning Genly thus into a Columbus figure of sorts. By referring to this intergalactic empire in the Greek word "ecumene" (oikoumene), moreover, the novel links the Age of Discovery to what is considered the foundational moment of Eurocentric history and culture.[5] Besides, the Gethenian societies that the text portrays reflect the popular image in the western media of the abysmal postcolonial conditions in Third World countries with their barbaric pasts, rituals, parades, and feudal political structures, which are juxtaposed and contrasted with the progressive and enlightened Ekumen. Unlike Olaudah Equiano, whose transatlantic travel narrative opens up a space for himself to claim an oppositional (anti-imperial) subjectivity (Equiano), Genly's complicity with the Ekumen's imperial gaze ends up reproducing colonialist modes of knowledge, without clearing a space for the production of a counter-colonialist subjectivity. He continues to deny his ability to empathize with them or to "see the people of the planet through their own eyes" (11). Thus, by foregrounding this "black-on-black" conflict, as Gant-Britton calls it, *LHD* not only diverts attention from the problematic context of racial relations between Whites and Blacks but also mystifies and naturalizes whiteness, by simply reversing the dominant cultural representations of Blacks and Whites in the official American literary and national imaginary.[6]

The political unconscious of *LHD*, moreover, denies not only a materialist reading of the oppression of Blacks as captives and slaves but also refuses to frame it within the conventions and traditions of the slave narrative. When Genly Ai's human rights are being compromised when he becomes a prisoner and a fugitive, the novel erases any connection or homology between Genly's narrative of captivity and deliverance and the conventions of slave narrative.[7] The novel, moreover, relocates the scenes of the journey on the ice from antebellum United States to what looks like Soviet Siberia. In his experience as a

captive, Genly definitely lacks the slave's ultimate realization of the evils of slavery, because in the end this captivity is evacuated from the deliberate human rights abuses that characterize it. Instead, the guards are seen as "seldom harsh never cruel" as well as "effeminate" (*LHD* 176). Unlike slave owners and their overseers, furthermore, Gethenians "do not kill people on their farms; they let hunger and winter and despair do their murders for them" (*LHD* 189). Later on, after Lord Estraven rescues him from a freezing labor camp, the Voluntary Farms of Orgoreyn, and both journey on the ice back to Karhide, there is no introspection and self-reflection evident on Genly's part about his captivity and what it means for him as a representative of an expansionist, intergalactic power. In fact, all that Genly Ai is concerned about is reaching Karhide to send a message to his ship so that he may begin negotiating a new alliance for the Ekumen. The political unconscious of the text here disavows the fugitive slave's process of achieving self-realization through an understanding of his/her roots and a rejection of his/her oppression.

The gaps regarding the racial and the imperial intertwine here to form the fulcrum of the novel's political unconscious. The novel, I contend, can neither imagine a pre-Ecumenical history for Genly Ai as a subject of his own making, nor can it articulate the tremendous imperial and capitalistic powers of this Ekumen. While Genly's humanity is re-inscribed at the moment of his subjection to this galactic superpower, the Ekumen's powers are simply represented, or rather neutralized, as a "clearing house for trade and knowledge." Genly's position in the Ekumen, then, is not viewed as anomalous or ambiguous, for Genly holds this hopelessly naïve conviction in the righteousness of the Ekumen's expansionist ideology. To this extent, *LHD* invokes the suppressed intertextual references to Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and Marlow's unshakable faith in the righteousness of the civilizing mission. Perhaps, the unresolved contradictions about colonialism that seeped through, or spilled over, in this intertextual recoding of Conrad's classic text as a story of a man "gone native" can be said to form the fulcrum of the political unconscious of *LHD*.

While the erasure of the racial and colonial subtext of the African-American experience forms only one register of the political unconscious of *LHD*, the reproduction of the sexual anxieties and fantasies that have marked the relations between masters and slaves, Whites and Blacks in the US, constitutes the other. In *LHD*, to quote Kobena Mercer elsewhere, "the dialectics of white fear and fascination underpinning colonial fantasy are reinscribed by the exaggerated centrality of the black man's monstrous phallus" (134). In a text that purports to radically interrogate the oppressive nature of gender relations and sexual identity, Le Guin ironically renders all forms of black sexuality abnormal: On the one hand, Gethenian androgynous sexuality, its radical potential notwithstanding, is still Othered, as exceptional and perhaps deviant in all known Hainish worlds. The Gethenian fluid sexuality, moreover, remains unpredictable, a condition that accentuates the issues of control, power, and authority, upon which definitions of black masculinity and black male sexuality are predicated (Mercer 142). On the other hand,

Genly's fixed human sexual identity is also considered a perversion by his sexually-fluid hosts. For the Gethenians, Genly Ai, whose fixed and stable sexual identity is interpreted as being in "permanent kemmer," is seen as a "sexual freak," an "artificial monster," and a pervert (32, 36). The discourse of spectacle deployed in the auctioning of African slaves, moreover, appears here in Genly's travels from town to town as a "marvel and monstrosity" (97).

Unsurprisingly, then, the political unconscious of *LHD*, as it contends with the contradictions that emerge from its liberal multicultural ideology—contradictions that the novel cannot possibly resolve— re-inscribes the pathological nature of the Other's sexuality and its hypermasculine threat to white society. Such representations erase the historical context that compelled black men to incorporate these codes "as a means of recuperating some degree of power over conditions of powerlessness and dependency in relation to the white master subject" (Mercer 137). Although the Gethenians wonder out loud about this freak race of perverts called humans, the pathological image of human sexuality is still refracted through a black male. What was supposed to be a radical critique of the limitations of human conceptions of gender and sexual identity is eventually undercut by the political unconscious, the gaps and omissions, of the dominant cultural representations of black male sexuality. As a fantasy about a Black emissary, in short, the language of *LHD* betrays its purpose. Sarah Lefanu, for one, states, Le Guin's "passion for synthesis at all costs leads to a surface calm that barely conceals the cracks beneath; in neither novel [*LHD* and *The Dispossessed*] is the political potential lived in the language" (143).

Mary Doria Russell's *The Sparrow*: Postnationalism, Radical Ignorance, and The Politics of Reversal

Like Le Guin's *LHD*, Mary Doria Russell's first contact fantasy, *The Sparrow*, invests a great deal in the celebration of extraterrestrial Otherness and radical difference, while displacing the specific formation of ethnic and racial identities in the here and now as well as downplaying the political conflicts that characterize narratives of first contact. Written in the aftermath of the controversy about the Quincentennial and the Columbus legacy, Russell's fantasy centers on Emilio Sandoz, a Puerto Rican of Taino descent, who is spearheading a Jesuit mission to explore a new planet, Rakhat. Throughout the novel, Sandoz struggles with his feelings towards God, and his journey into and back from space becomes a vehicle for his internal psycho-religious quest to discover the truth about his own relationship with God. This language of religious redemption notwithstanding, the journey ends tragically, as Sandoz, the celibate man of God and the only survivor of the whole crew, is subjected to the trauma of corporeal mutilation and the humiliation of multiple sexual violations at the hands of his alien hosts. At the political level, therefore, *The Sparrow* operates much like *LHD* with its philosophy of integration: it substitutes a universal, metaphoric narrative of conflict between humans and aliens for the specific struggle of minorities, in this case Native Americans and Latino/as, for survival in neocolonial Euro-America. More-

over, *The Sparrow* replaces the messy politics of encounter narratives with mysticism and the vision of cosmic unity. Consequently, the particularities of the constitution of Sandoz's subjectivity in its socio-historical context are erased, for he is now represented as an emblematic figure of the human race, in general, and of those same forces that colonized him, in particular.

The political unconscious of *The Sparrow*, I argue, emerges from its inability to engage the contradictions, lapses, and parallels between the two overlapping forms of Otherness that it codifies: Sandoz's ethnic Otherness and the extraterrestrial Others. The fact that this mission is spearheaded by an Other, whose ancestors have been decimated and whose culture has been obliterated by the same historical forces that he serves as an agent and representative of, is largely ignored. This novel never recognizes Sandoz's status as an Other, since that would further complicate the discursive appropriation of the indigene in it, especially the ways in which cultural representations of the Other have been semiotically reproduced, as Terry Goldie notes, to "[refer] back to those [images] offered before" (qtd. in Gordon 214). In order to displace the historical record of the conquest of the Americas and its brutality, the novel continuously resists doubling the Other, disavowing any specular economy between these two forms of Otherness.

As the possibility of an uncanny form of Otherness is denied, Sandoz's Otherness is disarticulated or disavowed, while extraterrestrial Otherness is assimilated into the Self, or the Subject (God), in a mystical union. Joan Gordon, for example, points out that the novel's humans "see only the similarities between the alien species and ourselves and cannot estrange ourselves from Rakhat" (215). Gordon is obviously reading the novel as a "literalization of metaphor [contact narrative] central to SF" (215), in which human culture (in the singular) is posited against alien ones, which explains the frequent deployment of the first person plural pronouns—the nominative (*we*), the reflexive and intensive (*ourselves*), and the possessive pronominal adjective (*ours*), in the complete original passage. The nominative we, however, is not homogenous, because Sandoz's humanity has historically been disparaged by colonial discourse. Gordon's reading then overlooks the multi-tiered taxonomy of specular Otherness in the novel, turning Sandoz into a signifier of the universal human, or White Anglo-American, depriving him thus of his specific ethnic history of victimization and oppression. These omissions and gaps in *The Sparrow* are unraveled in the sequel, *Children of God* (1998), in which the Native American character, Danny Iron Horse, identifies the Jana'ta with the Plains Indians and plans on saving them by setting reservations up for them; nothing like these parallels can be found in *The Sparrow*, however. In short, a gap opens in the novel regarding the double meaning of Otherness and its uncanny nature, and the only way that the novel seems capable of suturing that gap is by universalizing Sandoz and reconfiguring his emblematic status as an exploree and a colonized subject through discourses of hybridity and postnationalism.

Theories of postnationalism and hybrid identity reread the colonial encounter as a transcultural event, or as a "cooperative venture" to use Edward

Said's words (269). Moreover, by foregrounding the ambivalences and indeterminacies in the colonial condition, discourses of hybridity and postnationalism shift the grounds of the discussion from resistance and its Manichean subtext to, as Leela Gandhi says, the "mutual contagion and subtle intimacies" between colonizers and colonized (129). In *The Sparrow*, thus, Russell celebrates Sandoz as a symbol of the "hybrid vigor . . . The strengths of two continents" (Russell 130). In addition, Sandoz, the traditional victim of European colonization, becomes a symbol of the same forces that have exterminated his people and continue to dominate them within a neocolonial capitalist economy. This allows the novel to affirm the colonizers' innocence through what Russell refers to as "radical ignorance" and as a result to offer a culturally-relativist renarrativization of the brutal history of European colonialism by granting the colonizers absolution from their crimes against humanity.

In her critique of contemporary revisionist historians' re-assessment of Columbus and the early European explorers as racist colonizers and myopic religious fanatics, Russell invokes an epistemological frame that she calls "radical ignorance" ("A Conversation" n.pag.). Impatient with the irreverent attitude of historical revisionists towards Columbus and the conquistadors, Russell decided to write this novel because she believed it to be "unfair for people living at the end of the twentieth century to hold those explorers and missionaries to standards of sophistication and tolerance that we hardly manage even today." Unlike Orson Scott Card's *Pastwatch: The Redemption of Christopher Columbus*, which acknowledges the abysmal Columbian record of genocide and re-imagines a new narrative of encounter, the novel's stated goal is to "show how very difficult first contact would be, even with the benefit of hindsight." At one point in the novel, Emilio Sandoz reiterates these sentiments as he explains to the Jesuit committee the motives of his nemesis, Johanness Voelker, in blaming him for the failure of the mission. Sandoz's words seem to capture Russell's opinion of the revisionist historians and their "Columbus bashing":

> He wanted it to be my fault somehow, . . . he is not a bad guy, John. It's human nature. He wanted it to be some mistake I made that he wouldn't have made, some flaw in me he didn't share, so he could believe it wouldn't have happened to him. But it wasn't my fault. (*The Sparrow* 393)

Determined to write a counter-revisionist fictional narrative of the colonization of America, Russell thus decides to write "a story that put modern, sophisticated, resourceful, well-educated, and well-meaning people in the same position as those explorers and missionaries—a position of *radical ignorance*" (emphasis added; "A Conversation" n.p.). In the sequel to this novel, *Children of God* (1998), this term is defined as "a state [. . .], where nothing is known about the ecology, biology, languages, culture, and economy of the other" (*Children* 21).

To show that any first contact can be fraught with tensions and conflicts is historically accurate and indeed obvious, but to allege that the early colonizers inhabited a "position of radical ignorance" vis-à-vis the Other misrepresents the extent of Columbus's consciousness and intimate knowledge of Otherness, both historically and textually. Columbus witnessed the Spanish war with the Moors as well as their expulsion in 1492. In his "Address to King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella," Columbus places his endeavor to sail westward in light of recent historic events—the fall of Granada and Alhambra as well the surrender of the Moorish king, who came "out at the gate of the city and kiss[ed] the hands of your Highness, and of the Prince my Sovereign" (11). In addition, one of Columbus's motives to embark on his voyage to India via the Atlantic was to raise money to liberate the Holy Sepulchre from the "infidel" Muslims. Columbus's knowledge of the Other was not only historical but also textual. His aforementioned "Address" is heavily informed by Marco Polo and his *Travels*, co-authored with the Romance writer Rustichello of Pisa; references to Kubilai Khan and the Muslims (Polo's vicious Saracens), as enemies of the Christians, frame Columbus' *Diario*.[8] Columbus and the early colonists were not ignorant of radical Otherness, as Russell wishes her readers to believe; these colonists were intimately acquainted with the Other not only through actual transactions in the contact zone but also through classic Eurocentric texts that orientalized the Other in order to justify their colonization and genocide.

As such, the claim that Columbus and the early explorers were men of their time and that they should not be blamed for the extermination of the indigenous peoples of the Americas is indeed preposterous. Such a contention, according to Hans Koning, is emblematic of the arguments that the "Columbus lobby" has been making to counterattack history. Comparing the account of Bartolomé de las Casas of the ruthlessness of the conquistadors with Columbus' unrepentant and unremorseful record, Koning writes, "The lobby also tells us Columbus was a man of his time; so he was, but of his time at its worst. I think there is no denying that even in the bloody annals of colonial history the 'Early Spanish Main' is unique in its total absence of conscience" (23). More importantly, however, refusing to take the views of revisionist historians seriously, Russell ignores the importance of the conquest and its history of appropriation in American public discourse. As Robert Stam and Ella Shohat note, the debate over the Quincentenarry is not merely a semantic squabble (conquest, discovery, or arrival?), but a contest over the contents of American national memory (its innate goodness and superiority), the meaning of patriotism, and the interpellation of "generation after generation into the colonial paradigm" (307). Hence, the importance of this debate to an analysis of the displacement of the minority Other in the multicultural U.S., because people like Sandoz are the ones who are usually excised from such a national imaginary as foreign, strange, alien.

Central to this notion of radical ignorance in the contact zone, and its postnational subtext, is the affirmation of the innocence of the colonizers and the depoliticization of first contact narratives. Sandoz and his crew are presented as cultural relativists and politically correct modern-day explorers; they are all polyglot, well-meaning, very educated, and attuned to difference. They do everything they can to engage the native Runa and Jana'ta from outside the discursive framework and epistemologies of modernity. In contrast, the sequel presents the attempt of the colonizers to familiarize the Other and consequently to absorb it within the traditional colonial economy of Otherness. As Gordon eloquently puts it in her analysis of *Children of God*, "Familiarization rapidly descends into violent erasure" (214). Indeed, the postmodern explorers of *The Sparrow* waste no time in deconstructing Self/Other, human/alien dichotomies that have plagued the history of cross-cultural encounter. Sandoz, for example, is quick to destabilize the sophisticated/primitive binary by defending the Runa against George's charge that they might be simple minded. Emilio instead offers, "What seems like simplemindedness may be our ignorance of their subtlety. And it's very difficult sometimes, to tell ignorance from lack of intelligence. We may seem a little dim to the Runa" (262). Other members of the crew manage to deconstruct the beautiful/ugly dichotomy, declaring "they are so beautiful . . . We are outlandish" (225). These modern explorers are also conscious of the problem of spatial location and how it might be mistranslated into moral distinctions and hierarchical relationships between Self and Other. When he first meets Askama, the Runa child who becomes his closest friend and teacher and whom he eventually murders, Sandoz drops "on his knees, so he would not loom over her, as the adult had loomed over him" (226-27). Even their landing site on Rakhat was carefully chosen to avoid being spotted by any inhabitant of the alien planet (219), as if the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle (the negative effect an observer may have, even if hidden) has no bearing on contact narratives. Consequently, the encounter is depoliticized by becoming a "dance of discovery" as "the two groups, aliens and natives, merged, enthralled" and as Sandoz's feelings of transcendence and cosmic integration become like a "prism, gathering up God's love like white light scattering it all directions" (228). Gordon captures well this simulacrum of a "postcolonial utopia" where "societies with different levels of technology and different world-views might coexist in harmony, without either hegemonic colonialism or the vicious ultra-nationalism that sometimes replaces the colonialist presence" (213). This utopia evidently exists in a non-dialectical postnational space.

The innocence of the colonists and depoliticization of the contact zone are further established by representing the Jesuit missionaries as idealist moralists, not violent colonizers. In the "Prologue," for example, the darker side of missionary history is concealed, as the author presents an adulatory account of the Society of Jesus. She depoliticizes the history of the Jesuits and vindicates them of any malicious intentions as men of God:

> The Jesuit scientists went to learn, not to proselytize. They went so that they might come to know and love God's other children. They went for the reason Jesuits have always gone to the farthest fron-

> tiers of human exploration. They went *ad majorem de gloriam*: for the greater glory of God.
>
> They meant no harm. (Prologue n.pag.)

Throughout the novel, the historical record of how the Jesuits translated *ad majorem Dei gloriam* into a despicable record of violence, brutality, and genocide is obliterated. Russell's novel, thus, seeks to cover up the complicity of the Jesuits in the project of colonization and empire-building. Unfortunately, history shows that the Jesuits, like other missionaries around the world, played a significant role in advancing the cause of empire. The Huron people, who inhabited the areas in Southern Ontario, for example, were exterminated by the time the Jesuits, or "black robes" as they were generally known, left; that happened only 10 years after they settled among the natives (Ellwood).[9] As Thomas Richards correctly points out in his discussion of the meaning of exploration in *Star Trek*, "Historically there is no such thing as exploration for exploration's sake. Exploration usually leads to empire, and empire to war" (13). In *The Sparrow*, however, colonists and missionaries are viewed in a very positive light, and the long history of colonial violence and genocide visited upon the natives is ironically reduced to references to acts of native insurgency and resistance.

In the political unconscious of this book, colonial positionalities are easily reversed by turning the natives into aggressors. At one point, Father Guiliani contemplates the history of the Jesuits, "men astutely trained in letters and fortitude," and their long record of martyrs like Isaac Jogues. Guiliani realizes that Jogues was

> trekking eight hundred miles into the interior of the New World—a land as alien to a European in 1637 as Rakhat to us now . . . . Feared as a witch, ridiculed, reviled for his mildness by the Indians he'd hoped to gain for Christ. Beaten regularly, his fingers cut off joint by joint with clamshell blades . . . . Rescued after years of abuse and deprivation, by Dutch traders who arranged for his return to France, where he recovered, against all odds.
>
> Astonishing, really: Jogues went back. He must have known what would happen but he sailed back to work among the Mohawks, as soon as he was able. And in the end, they killed him. Horribly. (*The Sparrow* 134-135)

Jogues and the other missionaries remain an enigma for Russell, for their passionate devotion to "the mathematics of eternity" and salvation, with its subtext of masochism and psychosis, defies logic and rationality. As such, the native Mohawks can be represented as nothing but barbaric murderers, whose struggle for survival and human dignity is glossed over as irrational resistance to the natural course of history and the teleological progress of Christianity

and capitalist civilization. Similarly, the Runa, who are seen in *The Sparrow* as the Jana'ta's victims, suddenly reverse roles in the sequel and become the agents of genocidal politics (239).

By these role reversals, the traditional victims of conquest and genocide are blamed for their oppression. The most significant example of this role reversal for our purposes though is that of Sandoz. As he journeys across time and space, this hybrid descendant of the Taínos is abducted in his sleep, captured and kept in a cage, mutilated, and brutally sodomized, gang raped in fact, by his host, the Jana'ta merchant Supaari VaGayjur, and his associate, the poet of erotica, Hlavin Kitheri. This representation of Sandoz as a "prostitute," however, contradicts the traditional colonial iconography of hypermasculinity and prowess prescribed to the colonizers, who penetrate foreign lands and people to erect their empire. Sandoz, who should now be associated with these images of hypermasculinity, is nonetheless still represented in those terms reserved for the effeminate native. At this point, the novel can no longer submerge the contradictions and gaps in its representation of Sandoz as the universal symbol of humanity; the political unconscious erupts and Sandoz' status and positionality as a colonized, ethnic Other are reinscribed, yet occluded. The novel is thus quick to point out the extent of Sandoz' humiliation, especially for a man, whose machista culture identifies masculinity with three F's—"feo, fuerte y formal [ugly, strong and serious]" (205). Whether an explorer or exploree, that is, the Native American in the logic of liberal multiculturalism will always in the end be screwed, metaphorically and literally.

Unsurprisingly, then, Sandoz, reinstated now to his emblematic figure as a colonial Other, is blamed for his own rape. To this extent, the representation of Sandoz here invokes what Renato Rosaldo calls "imperialist nostalgia" by which anthropologists exoticize and aestheticize the same cultures they help destroy. Rosaldo writes that

> Nostalgia is a particularly appropriate emotion to invoke in establishing one's innocence and at the same time talk about what one has destroyed. Don't most people feel nostalgic about childhood memories? Aren't these memories genuinely innocent? Indeed, much of the imperialist nostalgia's force resides in its association with (indeed, its disguise as) more genuinely innocent tender recollections of what is at once an earlier epoch and a previous phase of life. (108)

The novel idealizes Sandoz at the moment of his disempowerment. Sandoz is evidently unable to understand the intricate hierarchical structure of the host culture. As a true romantic idealist, moreover, Sandoz, keeps misreading all signs of imminent catastrophe by denying the possibility that his captivity and the display of his nude body in front of the Reshtar Kitheri are indications of his new status as a commodity. He refuses to see that Supaari had sold him

into prostitution to the Reshtar and that he was the object of desire at an orgy feast. To the contrary, he continues to justify their actions within the framework of both Christian hermeneutics—as a sign of God's grace and design, and scientific rationality—as a proof of their natural curiosity towards the body of an alien (*The Sparrow* 390-91). Russell's imperialist nostalgia inadvertently leads to that exoticization of the natives, while at the time blaming them for their own oppression and victimization.

In this article, I have argued that the utopian and visionary impetus of representing minority characters in Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* and Russell's *The Sparrow* is not radical enough because it ignores the historical and ideological contexts in which these texts were produced. It could be argued, however, that by de-linking their minority characters from any system of racial and cultural essentialism, Le Guin and Russell turn race into a sliding signifier, clearing thus a space for the articulation of alternative representations of difference and for the liberation of readers and society from the tyranny of essentialist discourses of race and identity politics.[10] Although deconstructing the Self/Other binary and celebrating abstract forms of difference in these works pose a definite challenge to mainstream views on Otherness and diversity, these deconstructive strategies cannot by themselves be delinked from the socio-political context, especially the race ideology, that shapes the attitudes and perceptions of the Other. To tap into the subversive trajectory of the fantastic, these texts need to allow for the production of an alternative politics of desire, one that eschews the ideal of undifferentiation between Self and Other and that re-places conflicts between Self and Other in the here and now, instead of displacing them onto a transcendent structure of Jungian synthesis of polarities, as Le Guin does, or onto quests for mystical union with God, as does Russell. Investing in the political allows recognition of the impossibility of total symbiosis between Self and Other, and hence neither assimilation nor annihilation, within the power structures in contemporary multicultural US. Only by balancing the aesthetic and utopian with the political and real can SF be visionary, yet committed to the transformation of social relations in the present.[11]

Notes

[1]Mr. Spock wore the IDIC medallion in "Is there in truth no beauty?", the sixty-second episode of the third season of *Star Trek: The Original Series*. For a general overview of the treatment of race in American SF, see James; for various views on race and color in the fantastic, see the essays in Leonard.

[2]Some critics have celebrated the subversive potential of the androgyny in Le Guin's novel for its disavowal of the Oedipal complex and the problem of violence in sex as well as all manichean divisions of humanity into strong/weak, dominant/submissive, etc. Others, however, have found her vision of this alternative sexuality too androcentric and conservative. See Rosinsky and Lefanu for two summaries of this debate.

[3]See, for example, the articles by Theall and Bickman in Bloom as well as Gant-Britton's article.

[4]Darko Suvin, for one, refers to Le Guin's work as integrationist.

[5]It might be worth mentioning that, according to Ulf Hannerz, Le Guin's father, A. L. Kroeber, discussed the ecumene in his 1945 Huxley Memorial Lecture to the Royal Anthropological Institute in London. The ecumene represented the "entire inhabited world as the Greeks understood it, [which] stretched from Gibraltar toward India and a China rather uncertainly perceived" (7).

[6]In fact, whites themselves cannot be found in this novel beyond a single reference to white Terrans who look like Swift's Yahoos.

[7]On the structure of slave narratives, see Bell and also Foster.

[8]See Downs on Columbus and Manzurul Islam on Polo's discourse of Othering.

[9] See also Alden's massive history of the role the Jesuits played in the Portuguese empire.

[10]Frederik Pohl, for example, narrates how one of his white "Joe-Sixpack blue-collar" friends changed his views on race after realizing that one of the protagonists of Robert Heinelin's *Starship Troopers* was black (qtd. in Leonard 4), while Samuel Delany himself testifies how he felt liberated by that same work to start writing SF (James 27).

[11]A discussion of how certain SF writers and texts imbricate utopia and politics in SF is, needless to say, important for a complete understanding of the conventions of SF and its socio-political implications. As evident in my allusion to Octavia Butler's and Orson Scott Card's works, such an analysis should necessarily avoid any manichean categorization of SF novels featuring minority characters into liberationist texts written by minority writers vs. racist texts written by White writers. A theory that examines the production and representation of minority characters in SF novels can perhaps rework Abdul R. JanMohammed's classification of colonial novels into imaginary and symbolic texts for the circumstances and demands of multiculturalism. Elaborating on such a thoery will have to wait for another article.

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