

# A Reluctant Ambassador from the Planet of Midnight

Nalo Hopkinson

*Note: The bracketed portions of the text indicate actions by the speaker.*

I'D LIKE TO THANK THE INTERNATIONAL ASSOCIATION FOR THE FANTASTIC IN the Arts for dedicating this year's ICFA to the theme of race in the literature of the fantastic, and for inviting Mr. Tatsumi, Mr. Yep, me, and many others to address the topic.

The first thing I'd like to say is

[THE SPEAKER BECOMES A "HORSE," POSSESSED BY AN ALIEN BEING.]<sup>1</sup>

Uh...oh my. It worked. I'm here. [SHE LOOKS AT HANDS, THEN AT AUDIENCE.] Dear people, please don't be alarmed. I mean no harm. I really don't. I'm riding on the head of this horse only for a short time, I promise you. Please don't hurt me. This was an extreme measure. There seemed to be no other way to communicate directly with you.

I come from another planet. For decades now, we have been receiving broadcasts from your planet that seem to be intended for us. We are delighted, and honored, and also puzzled. We have teams of our best translators working to decipher your messages, and we cannot honestly tell whether they are gestures of friendship, or of aggression. As you might imagine, it's quite important for us to know which. If it is indeed friendship, we would be delighted to reciprocate. If of aggression, well, as one of our ethnocultural groups might say, "Don't start none, there won't be none."

I should be very clear: I do not represent my whole planet. Neither do I represent my whole ethnocultural group. Or even all of the translators assigned to this project; try to get any two of us to agree to the same thing... There was vehement disagreement among us about whether I should attempt this dire method of direct communication. So, frankly, I snuck away when no one was looking.

[SHE FIDDLES WITH CLOTHING.]

My, this horse does dress most uncomfortably, doesn't she?

[SHE TAKES TOP SHIRT OFF TO REVEAL T-SHIRT THAT READS “SPEAKER TO WHITE FOLKS.”]



Figure 1. Nalo Hopkinson, “Speaker to White Folks.” Photo courtesy of Bill Clemente.

This? This is merely my name, dear friends. Or my title, if you will. I hope I may indeed call you friends. But to help ensure my safety, or at least to create a record of what happens this day, I am accompanied by my companion, Dances With White People, and his recording device. [SHE INDICATES DAVID FINDLAY, WHO’S VIDEOTAPING.] Again, please don’t be alarmed. It is not a weapon of any kind.

So. To the business at hand. It is my hope that if I repeat to you some of the most vexing phrases we’ve received from your peoples, that you might be able to clarify their meanings. I decided to address this erstwhile conference because as you might imagine, we, as a different race of beings than you are, are very interested in the stories you tell each other about interracial relations. We have had bad experiences with the collision of cultures. Some of them even between groups on our own planet. So I’m sure you can understand why we are concerned.

Our first sign that perhaps our responses to you were going awry was when

we released this document into your world:

[SLIDE: Original cover of novel *Midnight Robber* accurately depicting the protagonist, who is a brown-skinned little girl with black African features].

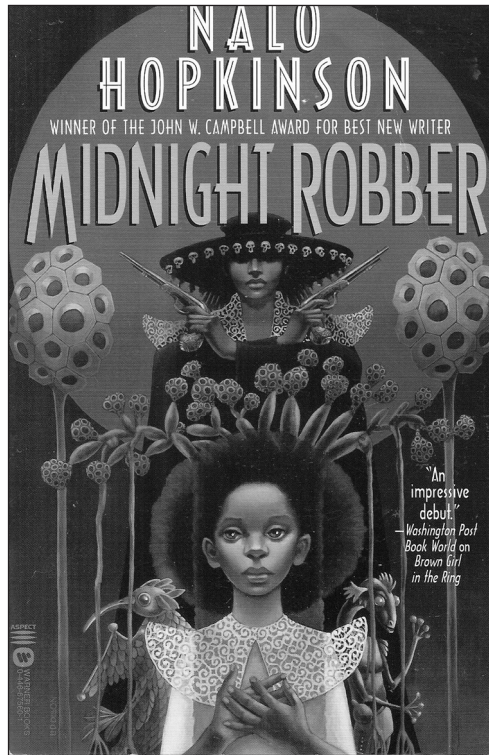


Figure 2. *Midnight Robber* book cover. Image reproduced by permission of the author.

When one of the cultures of your world reconfigured it, this was the result:

[SLIDE: Cover of Italian translation of *Midnight Robber* (*Il Pianeta di Mezzanotte*) showing protagonist in her later years as a blue-skinned young woman with European features and straight hair, wearing a bra top and fringed mini-skirt].

As far as our translators can tell, the title of this version can be rendered as *The Planet of Midnight*, which, according to your understanding, seems to be where the blue people live. We have noticed a preponderance of wistful references in your literature to magical people with blue skin.



Figure 3. *Il Pianeta di Mezzanotte* book cover.  
Image reproduced by permission of the author.

[SLIDES: Nightcrawler; Mystique; The Beast (all from *The X-Men*); Kali; Krishna; Dr. Manhattan; Papa Smurf; Smurfette; the Cookie Monster; etc. But none of the beings from *Avatar*, cuz I'm ornery that way and don't want to invoke that particular farce in this space today. Besides, the connection should be self-evident.]

Since none of the images of real people from your world show such blue-skinned beings, we can only theorize about what these images symbolize or eulogize. Perhaps a race of yours that has gone extinct, or that has self-destructed. Perhaps it is a race that has gone into voluntary seclusion, maybe as an attempt at self-protection. The more pessimistic among us fear that this is a race being kept in isolation, for what horrendous planet-wide crime we shudder to imagine; or that it is a race of earlier sentient beings that you have

exterminated. Whatever the truth of the matter, we're sure you realize why it is of extreme importance to us to learn whether imprisonment, extinction, and mythologizing are your only methods of dealing with inter-species conflict.

Here are some of the other phrases with which we're having trouble:

YOU SAY: I'm not racist.

PRIMARY TRANSLATION: I can wade through feces without getting any of it on me.

SECONDARY TRANSLATION: My shit don't stink.

Our dilemma: To us, someone making this kind of delusional claim is in immediate need of the same healing treatments we offer to people who are convinced that they can fly. Such people are a danger to themselves and to others. And yet, the communications from your world are replete with this type of statement from people who do not seem to be under treatment of any kind, and few among you take any steps to limit the harm they do. We are forced to conclude that you must be as *laissez-faire* in your response to people who think they can fly. This can't possibly be true, can it? Few of us are willing to visit a planet where we would clearly have to dodge plummeting bodies with every step. [SHE FLINCHES, LOOKS UP.]

YOU SAY: This story is a universal one.

TRANSLATION: This story is very specifically about us, and after all, we're the only ones who matter.

Our attempts at translating this one caused quite an argument in our ranks. Several feuds have started as a result, and one or two of them have gotten quite ugly. Because why would any sentient race say something that means its exact opposite? Well, one of our number did point out that we ourselves do occasionally display this regrettable habit. But that's an us thing; you wouldn't understand.

YOU SAY: That thing that you made doesn't belong to you. It's universal.

Now, this one is complicated. To make any sense of it at all, we had to proceed from statements of the previous type, in which "universal" means, approximately, "we own it."

Therefore, our attempt at a primary translation is this: I like that thing you made, so I'm going to claim it's mine. And I'm bigger than you, and nobody who counts really likes you anyway, so you can't stop me.

SECONDARY TRANSLATION, FOR BREVITY: I think yours is prettier, so I'm just going to help myself to it.

YOU SAY: Ethnic.

PRIMARY TRANSLATION: Those quaint and somewhat primitive people over there.

SECONDARY TRANSLATION: Unnatural, abnormal, or, disgusting, as in your term "ethnic food."<sup>2</sup>

You must understand that on our planet, everyone has an ethnicity. With cultural mixing, some of us have more than one. To us, "ethnic" means "the cultures of everyone." Clearly, we are missing something crucial, and "ethnic" is not the word you actually mean. We beg you to provide us with clarity.

YOU SAY: God, you people are so exotic.

PRIMARY TRANSLATION: I, by the power vested in me as a representative of a dominant culture that needs never question its certainty that it is the center of the universe, hereby dub you "the entertainment."

SECONDARY TRANSLATION: God, you people are so ethnic.

One of our translators offered a tertiary translation: "Just take this money already and pose with my kid so I can take a picture." But, between you and me, he's somewhat, um, argumentative at the best of times.

YOU SAY: But I'm not the one who enslaved your people. That was my ancestors.

PRIMARY TRANSLATION: I benefit from the inequities that were institutionalized before my birth, and I have no interest in doing anything to disrupt that comfortable state of affairs.

SECONDARY TRANSLATION: I feel really guilty about this stuff, but it's bigger than me. I'm powerless.

TERTIARY TRANSLATION: (from you-know-who) Suck it up, bitches.

YOU SAY: I don't have any culture of my own; that's why I want yours.

PRIMARY TRANSLATION: I am willfully unaware of or repulsed by how ubiquitous my rich and powerful culture has made itself. I'd really rather hang out with you guys.

SECONDARY TRANSLATION: I'm bored! This stuff is hard!

YOU SAY: I don't see race.

PRIMARY TRANSLATION: If I keep very quiet, maybe you won't see me and ask me to do any work.

SECONDARY TRANSLATION: I'm just a little black rain-cloud, hovering under the honey tree.<sup>3</sup>

YOU SAY: Eventually this race stuff won't matter, because we'll all inter-breed and become post-racial.

PRIMARY TRANSLATION: If I keep very quiet, maybe you won't see me and ask me to do any work. Plus you might have sex with me.

SECONDARY TRANSLATION: I don't want to do my homework! This stuff is hard! I want some cookies! Are we there yet?

YOU SAY: My grandparents had a hard time too when they came to this country.

PRIMARY TRANSLATION: Oh, shut up, already. Let's talk about me some more.

SECONDARY TRANSLATION: La-la-la, I can't hear you. That's because I don't see race.

YOU SAY: But we can't do that! That would be affirmative action!

PRIMARY TRANSLATION: I don't want to do something that's proven to work, because then, well, it might work.

Oh, dear. The horse is coming back online. She's putting up quite the struggle. Feisty little filly, ain't she? So I'm going to have to take my leave of you, and before I could get my answers, too. I'm so sorry. You have my questions, though? You heard them? You can send the explanations out via the usual channels through which you've been sending us messages. I promise we'll hear the...

[SHE BECOMES NALO AGAIN.]

Wow. What happened there? Never mind, probably just nerves. [SHE TAKES OFF T-SHIRT WITH A PLAIN BLACK DRESS UNDERNEATH.] Dunno where that ratty thing came from.

Anyway, every few years I come up with another statement about what fantasy and science fiction do. I don't discard my previous notions; I just add new ones for the consideration of myself and others. I don't consider them definitive or all-encompassing, and I consider them at best only partially descriptive. But I find them fun to contemplate.

The other day, our roommate told us that he'd asked his grandmother what technological invention had revolutionized her lives. He thought she'd say the television, but she replied, "No, that thing destroyed my social life."

She told him that in fact it was the refrigerator that changed her life. She said it freed up hours of her days, creating leisure time which allowed her to go and see a movie occasionally, and to hang out with friends.

My roomie's story left me thinking about just how labor-intensive it is to maintain a single human life, never mind a family of humans. We are a lot of work; really, to have any quality of life, we are more work than we can manage by ourselves.

Time was, if you were rich, you had servants to do a lot of the drudge work and administrative work for you. Hang on; that one hasn't changed.

If you weren't rich, you got together in communities and shared what labor you could, and you had children to help with the rest. And that one hasn't changed much, either.

And if you weren't the breeding kind, you found other ways to make yourself invaluable to the people in charge. I don't suppose I'm saying anything about this that is news to this crowd, so please bear with me while I build my argument.

So that's a really glossed-over version of how the balance of labor and power has traditionally tended to play out. But as disempowered groups in society become more empowered, they begin to be able to make more choices about where they are going to place their labor efforts.

We've made magic; we've created this near-intangible substance called "money" (it's almost more an idea than a substance, really) which you can use—if you have enough of it—to compel or convince others to do some of your work for you.

In many countries of the world, women and men can now choose to have fewer children.

Sometimes, people are able to choose to do blue collar work over relatively unskilled labor, can get the education that allows them to do white collar work, or even end up in the highly skilled labor pool, the one in which you find doctors and lawyers. If you manage to boost yourself there, you can afford to hire people to do a lot of your drudge work for you.

But the necessity for *somebody* to do the hard labor to sustain human lives and communities hasn't gone away. One way we make sure that there are always people to do that work is by deliberately keeping portions of our populations disenfranchised so that they have little choice but drudge work.

We also create "labor-saving" devices. But as anyone who's ever used a computer knows, in many ways, those just create new forms of work.

We're always imagining new ways around the dilemma. So it seems to me that one of the things that fantasy and science fiction do is to imaginatively address the core problem of who does the work.

Science fiction looks at technological approaches to the problem, and at all the problems the solutions create. You know, the discovery that a computer isn't exactly a labor-saving device. Or the question about what happens when our machines become so complex that they are in effect sentient beings able to demand rights.

Fantasy looks at the *idea* of work. Instead of using technology, it uses magic. But both are labor-saving devices.

And both fantasy and science fiction wrestle with the current and historical class inequities we maintain in order to have people to do the work.

Especially in North America, class differences have historically become so entrenched that they are characterized as or conflated with cultural and/or racial differences.

And as someone brilliant has said, race doesn't exist, but it'll kill ya.

So one might say that at a very deep level, one of the things that fantasy and science fiction do is to use mythmaking to examine and explore socio-economically configured ethnoracial power imbalances.

That's why those of us who live in racialized bodies and who love and read fantasy and science fiction because we relate so strongly to it can get so bloody irritated at the level of sheer, willful ignorance that members of the dominant community bring to the discourse about race and its real life effects. The discussion is everywhere in the literature, but some of the people in this community can be so adamant about being blind to it, and so determined to derail, belittle, obstruct, and silence those of us for whom it can literally affect the quality of our lives!

I've known for quite some time now that I'd end up on this podium, speaking on race in the fantastic. That was challenging enough, being a person of color addressing a mostly white crowd in North America on the issue of race in *anything*. I was already anxious and exercised about the whole thing. But then, white people in this community instigated the disturbance in the Force that we're now calling RaceFail 2009,<sup>4</sup> and what was already loaded became outright trigger-happy.

I know that some of you already have your backs up because I just said that white people instigated it. So be it. I'm not going to get into defending that statement. I'm up here presumably because somebody in this organization thinks I know what I'm talking about. My point is that writing this speech has been no doddle. I've been composing it in my mind for over a year now, through apprehension and anxiety. When it came down to the actual writing of it, I had to take frequent rage breaks.

In the course of RaceFail 2009, I have heard white people in the community who are angry at the anger displayed by people of color in the community; people who say that we don't deserve to be listened to if we can't be polite. I couldn't figure out why this statement felt wrongheaded to me, until I read a post by my colleague, writer Nora Jemisin, on RaceFail. She pointed out that discussions of race in this community have been happening, politely, for decades. And though there has been change, it has been minimal. When we people of color started to blow up, suddenly there were more of you paying attention. That's the thing. I've said that when you step on my foot once or

twice, I might politely ask you to get off it. But by the thousandth time you do it, the excuse of “I didn’t see you there” starts to sound a hell of a lot like, “I don’t care enough about you to pay attention.” The vehement response of people of color to RaceFail got more people paying attention, both white and of color. It showed us people of color that we do have a certain strength of numbers, that there are more of us than the one or two visibly of color people you’ll usually see at a con. People of color in this community have started publishing ventures together as a result. Some white people in the community began addressing the issue and began creating forums for discussion. Some of them held fast, even when they came under attack from all sides. A small handful of them had the guts to examine their own statements and actions, perceive where they had been racist, and admit it. Without saying that they were now afraid to go to cons because of angry brown people (in my experience, the wrath of the white majority is much more dangerous), without name-calling, baiting, or (black!)listing, and without deleting their whole blog right after posting an apology on it.

Some of you will recognize yourselves or friends of yours, or, hell, friends of *mine* in the actions I’m describing. It doesn’t necessarily mean that I hate these people. Believe it or not, my default is towards friendliness. People make mistakes. People say things they haven’t thought through. People do things they later regret. People hurt other people. People propagate systemic inequities because they don’t understand or care how the system works. I know that I do all those things. I’m learning that it’s what you do *after* you make the mistake that counts. The people who took their courage into their own hands and apologized probably discovered that they didn’t die from it. In fact, maybe they felt a little better than before.

More positive change that came out of RaceFail: fans of color began daring to blog their experiences and their feelings about systemic racism in fantasy and science fiction (both in the literature and in the community) because they realized there was some backup. Fans of all stripes—and by that I mean “white people, too”—began challenging each other to read books by people of color and review and discuss them, and they are by heaven doing it. Can I just say, I love me some fandom? Fandom is not exempt from the kind of wrongheadedness that humans display every day. But when fans conspire to do a good thing, it is most well done indeed, with verve and enthusiasm.

White fantasy and sf community has a culture of arrogance and entitlement that is infuriating. It became clear last year just how patronizing some of you could be, just how little you trusted us to have any insight into our own experience, an experience about which many of you are proud to say that you’re blind. If I’d ask one thing of you, it’d be to demonstrate your own impulses to equity and fairness—I know they’re there—by beginning from the assumption that people of color probably know whereof we speak on issues of

race and racism.

It also became clear that many of the white people who are able to make that collegial leap of equality and respect are so mired in guilt and trying to take the fall for the rest of you that they are somewhat paralyzed. That doesn't help either, and I'm not sure what the solution is. I think you could stand to talk amongst yourselves about that one.

One of the things I really wanted to say from this podium, people of color in this community, I love allyou. I love allyou can't done. I love how you stepped up to the plate in this past year; I kept feeling that love even when rage led to regrettable actions from some of you. I love how you looked out for each other; I love how you got energized. It's bloody terrifying to be up on this podium right now, but you give me the courage to keep going, and for that, I thank you. When RaceFail first began to happen, I was dismayed. I didn't think the Internet with its trolls and incendiaries was the place to have the discussion. I was wrong. Tempest Bradford, I was wrong, and I love you for holding strong, for keeping your sense of humor, and for speaking hard truths while being honest with and generous to pretty much everyone (by "everyone" I mean, "white folks, too").

There are so many names to be named of people who did the right thing through all this. I cannot name them all. Because I'll tell you, people, I tired. Oonuh, I tired to rass. I get seen as one of the go-to people when it comes to race in this community. I spent most of the last two years homeless and couch-surfing with my partner, recovering from illness and fighting a still ongoing struggle to get enough to eat from day to day. I simply didn't have the energy to take RaceFail on the way I wanted to. And when I began to hear from some of the more arrogantly obstructive white people in the community who were all of a sudden being friendly to me *without acknowledging their actions and the reasons for their overtures*, I saw red. Allyou think I just come off the banana boat or what? That is one of the oldest tricks in the book, and my mother didn't raise no stupid children. I am not your tame negress. I mean, I know I'm published by a mainstream house and have achieved some recognition. I know I'm in the house, people. But house negroes get a bad rap for being inherently complicit with Massa. There were and are freedom fighters among them, too. I know that a large part of the reason I'm up here has to do with the brave actions of people on the inside, of all colors, at the IAFA. And I thank you all profusely for it.

By the way, to the people in the community who have coined and are using the term "failfandom" to mock people of color who dare to call you on your racism, that's using derision, minimizing, and discrediting as tactics of suppressing dissent. And we see you coming a mile away.

Sure I'm angry. I also love this community and this genre to pieces. This literature and some of the people in this community have kept me alive; in

these past four years, sometimes literally so. It's why, as much as I can, I keep fighting for and with the community to be the best it can be, to live up to its own visions of worlds in which no-one is shut out. I'm very, very happy to be here, and happy to have been offered a podium from which to talk to this group of people on this topic. Any space created in this community for people of color, and any space we can make for ourselves makes it possible for more of us to find it easier to be ourselves, to speak up, makes it easier to write, or possible to write at all. That is true when we do it for any disenfranchised group of people within the larger fantasy and science fiction community; women, disabled people, queer people, poor and working class people, chronically ill people, old people. I'd lay odds that everyone in this room experiences at least one of those disenfranchisements. Making room makes room for all of us. It makes the possibility for even more great writing in a field where we are already blessed with so much of it; how wonderful would that be? And come right down to it, the writing is why we are all here, nah true?

### Afterword

A postscript, if I may; a few minutes after I gave this address, an audience member approached me privately and asked whether I was a Marxist. Surprised, I asked him why he thought I might be. He said it was because I had "reduced" the lofty subject of art to a mere question of labor. (Paraphrasing mine.) To him I'd like to say, mister, I am an artist who supports herself on the strength of her art and her ability to keep producing it. You'd be hard put to it to convince any artist that art isn't work. And you can't convince me that there's no art to labor. You can't convince me that art and the labor that creates it can be easily teased apart and considered as separate objects, and you sure as hell can't convince me that the latter is somehow base and impoverished in comparison to the former. And how sad is it that you apparently managed to ignore the main gist of my speech so profoundly that all you got from it were the few paragraphs I used to contextualize a much larger discussion of how fantasy and science fiction approach race?

### Notes

1. Papa Legba, ouvre baye pou mwen, Ago eh!
2. Tip o' the nib to Sally Klages.
3. Tip o' the nib to Winnie the Pooh and to A. A. Milne.
4. For more information, see Rydra Wong's *LiveJournal* blog at <<http://rydra-wong.livejournal.com/146697.html>>.

NALO HOPKINSON, born in Jamaica and now living in Toronto, Canada, is the author of fantasy and sf novels and a short story collection. Her award-winning novels include *Brown Girl in the Ring* (1998), *Midnight Robber* (2000), *The Salt Roads* (2003), and *The New Moon's Arms* (2007). Her short story collection, *Skin Folk* (2001), was the winner of the World Fantasy Award and the Sunburst Award. She has edited and co-edited a number of fantasy anthologies, the most recent being *So Long Been Dreaming: Postcolonial Visions of the Future* (2004) with Uppinder Mehan and *Tesseract 9* (2005) with Geoff Ryman. She has taught at the Clarion workshops and other venues, and has a master's degree in Writing Popular Fiction from Seton Hill University. She is a founding member and currently on the advisory committee of the Carl Brandon Society, which exists to further the conversation on race and ethnicity in sf and fantasy. Her online presence is at <http://nalohopkinson.com>, where she is chronicling work on new novels and short fiction.

EDWARD JAMES has a doctorate in archaeology from Oxford and currently holds the Chair in Medieval History at University College Dublin. He also has an Eaton Award, a Pilgrim Award, and half a Hugo, the latter for *The Cambridge Companion to Science Fiction*.

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