Space, Race, and Earthling Trash: Race, Refugees, and the Martian New Deal

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'A new start for everyone[…].'

- "The Other Foot"

'[Y]ou don't think you're gonna leave any trash behind […]?'

- "Way in the Middle of the Air"

'I think I'm going to quit my job.'

- "The Garbage Collector"

In his introduction to *Bradbury Stories: 100 of His Most Celebrated Tales*, Ray Bradbury explains that "The Garbage Collector" (1953) "was inspired by my reaction to a newspaper item that appeared in the Los Angeles newspapers in early 1952, when the mayor announced that if an atomic bomb fell on Los Angeles, the resulting bodies would be picked up by garbage collectors. I was so inflamed by this remark that I sat down and wrote the story, fueled by my outrage" (XII). The date and newspaper publication is identified *in* the story itself: December 10, 1951, *Los Angeles Times.* Yet, in the aforementioned introduction, Bradbury dates the article to "early 1952." We might here simply shrug. This is the stuff of obscure footnotes. However, the *Los Angeles Times* database has no record of any such article. The closest we get to Bradbury's alleged source

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material is a short piece in the *Los Angeles Times*, dated August 8, 1952: "Atom Blast Lifesaving Rules Given: Instructions Cover Before and After Time of Explosion." In event of a Soviet attack, the paper reported, government officials stated that all would be well if the public took some precautions. It suggested that men should wear long sleeve shirts and women should don "loose-fitting, light-colored blouses." Officials further reminded citizens to place their trash in "tightly covered cans." As for the blast itself, the government assured its citizens that the danger was exaggerated. While there would doubtless be some injuries, they would be superficial. First Aid kits should be at the ready to "bandage all cuts promptly." As for radiation that might kill millions more in the days, weeks, and months to follow the fallout, the government assured Americans that it was "not radioactively dangerous."

The public knew better. Not only had most seen televised clips of atomic explosions, millions of Americans had been further schooled by monster movies, which commonly featured "irradiated baddies" including "Godzilla—roused from the depths of Bikini Atoll by atomic testing"; "mutated spiders" and radioactive "school bus-size locusts" (Waldman, "Nuclear Monsters," online). The voracious appetite for mushroom-cloud Armageddon was such that *Galaxy* editor H. L. Gold complained in January 1952 that "Over 90% of stories submitted still nag away at atomic, hydrogen and bacteriological war, the post-atomic world, reversion to barbarism, [and] mutant children" ("Gloom and Doom", 2). Gold withdrew his criticism in the November 1955 issue, wherein he included an essay on atomic warfare, entitled, "Who'll Be Around?" (4) It began: "the question of racial survival [i.e., all humanity] is understandably on people's minds." It's important to note that previously Gold had published the early, shorter version of *Fahrenheit 451*, "The Fireman" (*Galaxy* February 1951). Like the novel, this story is set in a world tottering toward atomic war—in a teaser, and apparently with no intended irony, Gold promoted the story as having "an immense impact" ("Business Old and New," 3). Other Bradbury stories that likely made an impression on Gold included "The Other Foot" (1951), wherein no more than 500 humans survive the ravages of atomic fire: "None of the cities are worth saving—they will be radioactive for centuries" (50); in "There Will Come Soft Rains" (1950), tens of thousands of people die as a direct result of a nuclear attack, but ten times that figure die of radiation poisoning within thirty days; in "The Highway" (1950), Bradbury writes of a holocaust encircling the planet: "'The war!' shouted the young man as if no one could hear. 'It's come, the atom war, the end of the world!'"(60)

While Bradbury and his audience might be aware of the imminent dangers of nuclear fallout, Bradbury's garbage collector actually believes the official propaganda. Even in the aftermath of a Soviet strike, the roads, he believes, will be clear; buses and cars will run; trash trucks will be ready to compact. What troubles him is his new job description—collector of corpses: "They put a receiver on my truck today. They said, at the alert, if you're working, dump your garbage anywhere. When we radio you, get *in* there and haul out the dead. […] It's all blueprinted out. […] We even know where to *bring* the bodies" (245-246).

Why assign this grizzly work to garbage men? Why not assign the task to medical personnel, forensic pathologists, coroners, or paramedics? The garbage man's ethnicity may offer us some clues.

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Our first sanitation workers were dogs, who lived off our refuse. Once dogs were turned into pets, we forced the dirty work onto humans (Mikhail, online). Dogs, it seems, were moving up the social

order, men—or some men—down into the gutter. As glimpsed in August Wilson's play *Fences*, trash collection was one of the few career choices available to African Americans circa 1950:

> TROY: I do not care where he coming from. The white man am not going to let you get nowhere with that football no way. You go on and get your book-learning so you can work yourself up in that A&P or learn how to fix cars or build houses or something, get you a trade. That way you have something can't nobody take away from you. You go on and learn how to put your hands to some good use. Besides hauling people's garbage. (35)

Troy is not merely offering career advice; he's summing up an African American history of intergenerational social, educational, and economic injustices. Earl Conrad's novel, *Rock Bottom* (1952), similarly links Black communities and the dumps that they lived in: "We were just garbage put with the garbage" (81). As the word suggests, *dumps* or *slums* were often built close to garbage dumps. Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952) also aligns the ghettos of the city with garbage dumps: "I know what kind of garbage it is. You young New York Negroes is a blip! I swear you is! I hope they catch you and put your ass under the jail!" (330)

The upshot is that in "The Garbage Collector," someone will have to deal with the dead. And since virtually all American garbage men of the 1950s were Black, it seems pretty clear that, no matter the government's official position, our garbage man will be sent to his death, a victim of radiation poisoning, leukemia, cancer, and the like. In an era of segregation and prejudice, the racial discrimination here is still more nauseating: It's not merely that our trash collector will collect corpses; the more salient detail here is that all the bodies he collects will be *black*.

The objection to this argument is apparent: Won't the explosion kill all hues of humanity indiscriminately? Yes, but it's more complicated than that. According to first-hand accounts by survivors of Hiroshima and Nagasaki: "Passengers [in trains] died standing, being *burned black*." (P61 in A20); another recalled seeing a "dead body *burned black"* (P162 in A21); a third survivor witnessed "Dead bodies *burned black*" (P43 in A22); a fourth spoke of "carbonized bodies [ie., charred black]" (P73 in A17) (Harada, online; emphasis added). Moreover, it was legally essential, at least in some southern states, that Black people were buried in their own cemeteries. This from a statute in Georgia, still legal in 1953, the year "The Garbage Collector" was published: "The officer in charge shall not bury, or allow to be buried, any colored persons upon ground set apart or used for the burial of white persons" (Tischauser, 169). Since the charred corpses can only be identified by the color of their skin, in the event of nuclear attack, all the dead are *de facto* Black.

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Picking up charred human flesh, and not just once, but street after street, neighborhood after neighborhood, would require a de-sensitivity, an indifference, a form of dehumanization. That is what frightens our garbage man above all else: "I'm afraid of that. I'm afraid if I think it over, about my truck and my new work, I'll get used to it. It doesn't seem right a man, a human being, should ever let himself get used to any idea like that" (246). And then there are the logistics to consider. Our garbage man wonders whether he's supposed to "put the bodies in the trucks lengthwise or endwise, with the heads on the right, or the feet on the right. Men and women together, or separated? Children in one truck, or mixed with men and women? Dogs in special trucks, or just let them lay?" (247). Let's flashlight that murk: there is a distinct possibility that dogs will be treated better than charred human remains; they may well get their own "special

trucks." And where, we may wonder, will the bodies go? The answer lies in the atrocities of the Nazis, the Gang of Four, the Khmer Rouge—mass graves.

It's not just the expediency of a quick clean, a return to main street commerce and the like: there is, too, a tacit spiritual concern. In two of Bradbury's contemporaneous tales, "The Other Foot" (1951) and "Way in the Middle of the Air" (1950), African Americans embrace science *and* retain their religious heritage, but the dead in "The Garbage Collector" will lack religious burial rites; their lives will be snuffed and, in their prompt collection and unceremonious burial, so too their humanity. The underlying implications are now clear: The only way the ruling class can assuage this guilt (after all, they caused or will cause the nuclear war) is to outsource it. Black people can deal with it. After all, they would only be burying their own. And if, in that process, all the Black people die, then America's legacy of racism, segregation, and degradation will finally be expunged. As Montag says in *Fahrenheit 451*: "It was a special pleasure to see things eaten, to see things *blackened and changed.* …blazing and burning to bring down the tatters and charcoal ruins of history" (1); or, as Kurtz in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* puts it, the way to reconcile racial division is as straightforward as it is inhuman: "Exterminate all the brutes!" (57).

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There is something comically efficient in cleaning up after an extinction event. After all, who are we expecting? But what if some garbage men actually survive both the blast *and* radiation? *Atlantic* writer Mike Mariani explores an analogous state of affairs in his critique of *The Walking Dead*:

> The importance of the lives of characters on *The Walking Dead* is implicit, because theirs is the only story left to tell. In addition, that, of course, is the key to their fantasist power: Who wouldn't want to escape into characters leading lives of infallible significance, with their survival and the endurance of the human race perpetually at stake? ("The Tragic, Forgotten History of Zombies," online).

Applying that same logic to "The Garbage Collector," we might here note that without the bombs actually falling, our garbage man would presumably continue to live in an American version of G.K. Chesterton's Dark Age England: "Joy without a cause/Yea, faith without a hope" (18). It is only in the aftermath of a blast that our garbage man feels free to reassess the known and perhaps scrap what has come before.

We don't really know if our garbage man will rise to the moment or if that moment will ever come. Instead of declaring his intent, waving a sign of protest on a street corner, garnering the attention of the media, sending a petition to his Congressman, etc., our garbage collector is merely sitting in his kitchen, having a cup of coffee with his wife, talking about a possibility, teasing out the what ifs: "I think I'm going to quit my job" (245); "Maybe now I don't want to be a garbage collector anymore […] I don't know" (246).

I don't know is not the same as *damn it, I just won't.* Then again, Emerson argued that the age of traditional heroes—"Atlantean shoulders, and the whole carriage heroic"—is past; the next generation of heroes will come from the working class: "In some other and quite different field, the next [representative] man will appear; not Jefferson, nor Franklin, but now a great salesman; then a road-contractor; then a student of fishes; then a buffalo-hunting explorer, or a semi-savage western general" (9, 11-12). So why not a low-rung sanitation worker?

While a working-class hero may emerge from the rubble, *this* garbage man has no intention of becoming one of mankind's "leaders and law-givers" (12). He is a creature of anonymity: We

don't even know his name. Moreover, we have no sense that the garbage man's protest will spread. His seems to be a personal decision. For the sake of argument, let's assume he goes on strike. The result will likely be inconsequential, not because it is ethically meaningless, but because it will not change a thing. This is not one man standing up for and with his people; this is something still braver because it is so singular, and, hence, so socially meaningless—principle expressed in tight-lipped conduct.

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Given that African Americans will pick up the dead and, more than likely, die from radiation poisoning as a result, and that protest will have no structural effect, it seems logical to conclude that if African Americans do have a future, it isn't on earth. In the aforementioned "The Other Foot," Bradbury imagines a Martian colony made up solely of Black Americans, or, rather, Black former Americans. As a mother explains to her children, now only "white people live on Earth, which is where we all come from, twenty years ago. We just up and walked away and came to Mars and set down and built towns and here we are. *Now we're Martians* instead of Earth people" (39-40; emphasis added). Nonetheless, these émigrés have clear memories of Earth, specifically America, and why they felt it was so necessary to decamp:

> "[…] You remember? You remember how they hung my father on Knockwood Hill and shot my mother? You remember? Or you got a memory that's short like the others?"
>
> "I remember," she said.
>
> "You remember Dr. Phillips and Mr. Burton and their big houses, and my mother's washing shack, and Dad working when he was old, and the thanks he got was being hung by Dr. Phillips and Mr. Burton […]". (41)

Now that the (white) Earthlings have ruined their own planet, they are begging for refuge. At least one of the new Martians, Willie, wants to impose a form of socioeconomic revenge. If white people come to Mars, they will have to live in slums and "shine our shoes for us, and mop up our trash" (42). That's fine with the Earthlings: "we'll work *for* you and do the things you did for us—clean your houses, cook your meals, shine your shoes, and humble ourselves in the sight of God for the things we have done over the centuries to ourselves, to others, to you" (51).

Willie, in particular, and the Earthlings, collectively, believe that this reversal constitutes some form of justice. As the title of the tale suggests, the shoe is now on the other foot. But, as Willie concedes, now that they are Martians, there is "nothing […] left to hate. […] Now everything's even. We can start over again, on the same level" (54). That said, it is the Black Martians who have the most to lose here. Since *all* the settlers are Black—or to employ the antiquated biosocial terminology of the era, *of one race*—there is, by definition, no racial other to hate, hence no racism. In terms of (supposed) social and genetic purity, the Earthlings and their new Martian counterparts both get what they want: separation safeguarded by a distance of 250 million miles. The coming of the ragtag Earthlings potentially changes all of that.

Of course, new Martians were themselves once emigrants, seeking, as all emigrants do, safe harbor and a new beginning; that is the case for the newly-arrived Earthlings as well. But there is a distinct difference. On Mars, erstwhile African Americans have created a just society, one in which the very notion of human rights apportioned by color or wealth is an absurdity. The new Martians have proved, in their isolation, to be peaceful, loving, and forgiving; the cap-in-hand Earthlings are just desperate.

And let's not forget the racist case history. Compare the serene society on Mars with the racism left behind. In Bradbury's "The Jar" (1944), Jahdoo, a "colored man" living in the American south inexplicably speaks in Jamaican patois: "That am Middibamboo Mama, from which we all come ten thousand year ago. Believe it! […] It know betta. It hang like pork chop in fryin' fat" (113, 106). The unlettered language, akin to the broken English found in Joel Chandler Harris's paean to Black sycophancy, *Uncle Remus: His Songs and His Sayings*—examples: "Better de gravy dan no grease 'tall" (156); "Good luck say: 'Op'n yo' mouf en shet yo' eyes" (157); "Hit's a mighty deaf nigger dat don't year de dinner-ho'n" (158) — suggests Jahdoo's marginal status—that, and the fact that he lives in a swamp. Still more relevant, in "Way in the Middle of the Air" Bradbury reimagines a stars'n'bars reaction to the loss of Black labor. To begin with, the white upper class can't grasp how African Americans built a high-tech gizmo without the superior knowledge and supervision of whites:

> "Seems these niggers kept it secret, worked on the rockets all themselves, don't know where—in Africa, maybe."
>
> "Could they do that?" demanded Samuel Teece, pacing about the porch. (641)

Africa here serves are a mythical otherness in which Black people are, in terms of science, well in advance of southern whites. Mars is, in this sense, a stand-in for Africa. More to the practical point, without Black labor, the landowners wonder how any of the backbreaking work will get done: "The washing rocks at the river were empty, and the watermelon patches, if any, were left alone to heat their hidden liquors in the sun"; "In the cotton fields the wind blew idly among the snow clusters" (645-646).

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Bradbury's "Way in the Middle of the Air" antedates Douglas Turner Ward's play, *Day of Absence* (1965), in which, again, all the Black people in a southern town have suddenly disappeared. Here too, Ward's good old southern boys refuse to sweep sidewalks, wash windows, or clean commodes:

> With the Nigra absent, men are waiting for machines to be cleaned, floors to be swept, crates lifted, equipment delivered and bathrooms to be deodorized. Why, restrooms and toilets are so filthy until they not only cannot be sat in, but it's virtually impossible to get within hailing distance because of the stench! (5)

The Mayor gets on TV to beg the town's "dirty-work doers" to return. It's hypothesized that all the Black people are drunk somewhere or playing some sort of practical joke, or that they have been seduced by communists. Mined from the same dumb-as-rocks quarry as Bradbury's Samuel Teece, Ward's southern mayor can't imagine that Black people truly have the technical skills to fly, much less fly beyond the moon to Mars. It's easier to imagine that all the Black people have merely "snucked away for a bit of fun" or have been "been hoodwinked by agents of some foreign government" (8-9). In any case, he soon resorts to threats: "We'll track you to the end of the earth, beyond the galaxy, across the stars! We'll capture you and chastise you with all the vengeance we command!" (5, 9) Ward sees Black emancipation in terms of labor and coercion.

Bradbury explores those same issues, but he offers a religiosity absent in Ward's play. Samuel Teece, pacing about his porch, demands, "Ain't there a law [to stop Black people from building a rocket]?" (641) When he is told there isn't any, he gets a gun and starts threatening his

field hand, Belter: "You tryin' to sneak out? By God, I'll horsewhip you!" (643) When threats of violence have no effect, Teece switches to sarcasm: "You want to travel, do you? Well, Mister Way up in the Middle of the Air, you get the hell home and work out that fifty bucks you owe me" (643). Teece is here referring to a then-common Spiritual lyric "Ezekiel Saw de Wheel":

> De big wheel run by faith
> Little wheel run by de grace of God
> Wheel in a wheel […]
> Way in de middle of de air…

To Teece, the lyric as a laughable fantasy; but to the oppressed Black people in Bradbury's tale, "Ezekiel Saw de Wheel" is simultaneously a reverse Middle Passage and an industrial blueprint—wheels within wheels, cogs in cogs; Exodus engineered.

Teece remains convinced, however, that his workers are too dumb and too intimidated to actually go into space: "There's monsters with big raw eyes like mushrooms! You seen them pictures on those future magazines you buy at the drugstore for a dime, ain't you? Well! Them monsters jump up and suck marrow from your bones!" But, even if the sci-fi magazines published fact rather than fiction, monsters in space are preferable to monsters on the Mississippi. Belter replies, "I don't care, don't care at all, don't care" (643).

There is still the matter of the fifty dollars. In lieu of paper and coin payment, Belter offers Teece his horse; Teece rejoins: "Horse ain't legal tender. You don't move until I get my money" (644). Bradbury has Teece laughing at Belter and winking to his fellow white farmers. Teece is uninterested in the payment. He simply wants to perpetuate the (un)Reconstructed post-slave economy. It was a common southern practice, according to Charles Sawyer, to rent a tract of land to Black workers and then underpay them, forcing them to take out loans with the very same landowner. The bare bone of Sawyer's economic analysis: "The result for many sharecroppers was a hopeless spiral of debt which left them bound to the landlord. It was the plight of the landless, and it left them in bondage to the land" (Sawyer, 45). As a landlord, Teece, therefore, feels justified in treating Black people as his personal property. It's his legal and cultural right. Referring to yet another of his indentured workers, Silly, Teece proclaims: "He's mine. I'm locking him in the back room until tonight" (647). In any case, Teece's economic stranglehold is a moot point. All the Black people in the town pool their money and pay off Belter's debt and, browbeaten by the other whites, who now see the writing on the wall, Teece releases Silly, on the condition that he collect the trash one last time: "you don't think you're gonna leave any trash behind to clutter my store" (648). The motif, soon to be repeated in Bradbury's "The Garbage Collector"—that trash collection is somehow an expected Black activity—is here framed as a form of nostalgia. An era has ended, trash-heaped.

Despite Teece's grudging acceptance of the new economic reality, it is clear that the whites are violent, oppressive, godless, lazy, and stupid. The American *sine qua non*, the pursuit of happiness, not to mention American technical invention and social innovation, is, in both "The Other Foot" and "Way in the Middle of the Air," entirely Black. In his introduction to *The Illustrated Man*, Bradbury recalls that "The Other Foot" was *so* pro-Black that, when first submitted for publication in 1949, no American magazine "would buy the story" (VII). The same anxiety presumably affects "Way in the Middle of the Air." Discussing the difficulties of publishing racially-themed stories in the 1950s, Bradbury explained that "*It was long before the Civil Rights movement, the Cold War was starting up*, and the House UnAmerican Committee was holding

hearings headed by Parnell Thomas (Joseph McCarthy arrived later). In such an atmosphere no editor wanted to land on Mars with my dark immigrants" (VIII; emphasis added).

Note Bradbury's concomitance. The American high-water marks of the 1950s and 60s were Civil Rights and the American space program. Before the former had ballast and the latter lift, Bradbury had not only identified both, he, moreover, also found ways of combining them. He was, in this regard, more than a decade in advance of broadcast journalist Edward R. Murrow, who argued America needed Black astronauts: "Why don't we put the first non-white man in space? If your boys were to enroll and train a qualified Negro and then fly him in whatever vehicle is available, we could retell our whole space effort to the whole non-white world, which is most of it." Looking back on Murrow's logic, the historian Douglas Brinkley, author of *American Moonshot* (2019), added cogently: "You put a person of color in space and it'll show how noble our democracy is" (Ludolph, July 16, 2019). Alas, the first astronaut of African descent was the Cuban cosmonaut Arnaldo Tamayo Méndez, who, in 1980, flew on the Soviet Union's Soyuz 38 mission; Guion Stewart Bluford Jr., an engineer on the tragic 1983 Challenger shuttle mission, was the first African American in space.

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Despite decades of English teachers explaining the Authorial Fallacy (i.e., that a work of fiction is not a direct, autobiographical expression of the writer) most readers remain stubbornly resistant. Biography, premised on the indivisibility of act and personality, remains a top seller. As John Feather and Hazel Woodbridge explain, "the undiminished human curiosity about other people's lives is inarguably reflected in the popularity of autobiographies and biographies" (Feather and Woodbridge, 218). In the case of the author of *The Martian Chronicles, Fahrenheit 451, The Illustrated Man*, and other staples of American literary excellence, most of us would like to believe, as David Denby said of Charles Dickens, that Bradbury "exhibits so exuberant and generous a degree of writerly candor and companionability that the reader is always loyal to him: this man is happily working to entertain us" (Online; December 28, 2016).

Unfortunately, on the matter of race, Ray Bradbury, the same author who wrote so broadmindedly, could in interviews, come across as tone deaf. In a 1974 essay, "Science Fiction: Before Christ and After 2001," Bradbury argued that sci-fi writers, while predominately white, were somehow victimized by literary apartheid: "If the blacks of our country were a racial minority in the late forties and early fifties, the science-fiction writer was classed as a literary minority best not mentioned, better ignored. We would never go anywhere, do anything, or be anybody. We were rarely allowed to sell stories to the larger more important magazines. And even in the s-f magazines, some of our more outrageous ideas [he is referring specifically to "Way in the Middle of the Air"] were rejected and went unpublished" (215). While Bradbury might here be arguing that his story was rejected specifically because it featured Black characters, comparing his rare rejection slips to hundreds of years of systemic racism is risible. But at least he recognizes hegemonic oppression; twenty-plus years on, in a May 1996 interview for *Playboy*, an apostatic Bradbury complains of the "Vassar girls who want me to put more women's lib in *The Martian Chronicles*" and the "blacks who want more black people in *Dandelion Wine*" (271-272). It gets worse. Concerning the 1992 Rodney King riots, Bradbury publicly blamed then-mayor Tom Bradley, a Black man: "Thus far I haven't had the guts to tell Tom Bradley, face-to-face, 'You did it"(277). How Bradley was responsible for four white police officers beating a Black man or the six days of reactionary violence that ensued, is unclear.

Just as odd, Bradbury, the man who in *Fahrenheit 451* rejected plutocracy, suggested that the public put its faith in corporations:

> BRADBURY: Along with man's return to the moon, my biggest hope is that L.A. will show the way for all of our cities to rebuild, because they have gone to hell and the crime rate has soared. When we can repopulate them, the crime rate will plunge.
>
> PLAYBOY: What will help?
>
> BRADBURY: We need enlightened corporations to do it; they are the only ones who can. All the great malls have been built by corporate enterprises. We have to rebuild cities with the same conceptual flair that the great malls have. We can turn any bad section of town into a vibrant new community. (277)

The man who once championed literature, at least on the day of that particular interview, placed the future of humanity into the corporate palms of The Gap and Walmart. That Bradbury makes these comments in a pornographic magazine may suggest a further layer of boorishness, but we would do well to remember that former President (then candidate) Jimmy Carter once used that same magazine (November 1976) as a legitimate outlet for political and spiritual discussion. That in itself is an indication of just how much society has changed.

Yet Bradbury is the same man who, in the story "A Blade of Grass," wrote of a robot, Ultar, that (who?) studies long-extinct human culture and concludes, that "perfect things came from such imperfect creatures" (448); the same writer who vanquishes human suffering by acknowledging universal pain: "By God, I *do* accept it *all*!" ("G.B.S.—Mark V," 433); the same man who wrote so sympathetically about the plight of illegal immigration:

> "[…] I've worked, I've got money. I look all right, don't I? And I don't want to go back!"
>
> "I'm sorry, Mr. Ramirez," she said. "I wish there was something I could do." ("I See You Never," 330)

This is the same man who created Spender, the Earthling who goes native but, in attempting to save Martian art and culture, only underscores his cold-blooded inhumanity: "'I'm the last Martian,' said the man, taking out a gun. '[…] I felt I was free of their ethics and their customs. I'm out of their frame of reference, I thought. All I have to do is kill you all off […]'" ("And the Moon Be Still as Bright," 419). Bradbury could even make us side with a nameless sinner, who confesses to killing his dog:

> And I beat and beat until I was weak and sobbed and had to stop for I saw what I'd done, and he [Bo, his dog] just stood and took it all as if he knew he deserved it, he had failed my love and now I was failing his, and I pulled off and tears streamed from my eyes, my breath strangled, and I grabbed him again and crushed him to me but this time cried: forgive, oh please, Bo, forgive. I didn't mean it. Oh, Bo, forgive… ("Bless Me, Father, For I Have Sinned," 598)

Collectively, these and other Bradbury tales serve as a study of humanity, probity expressed in fiction.

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Perhaps it is inevitable that an author with decades of publications would write or say something that, over time, is damaging to his or her literary reputation. Bradbury is here susceptible to the same charges Thomas Mann leveled at Knut Hamsun, a Nobel Prize novelist, who, in later years espoused politically unpopular views: "He stuck fast in the movement of apostasy from liberalism characteristic of that period, without comprehending what is at stake to-day, and without realizing that he is hopelessly compromising his poetical genius through his political, or, as I prefer to call it, his human behavior"(12). Likewise, many of Bradbury's readers may feel betrayed by their author because, while young (and thus, in some personal or artistic sense, immature) Bradbury seems to have been a stand-in for Montag, the free-thinker of *Fahrenheit 451*, the mature (hence, reflective) Bradbury seems, at least in the *Playboy* interview, to have sidled up to Beatty, the authoritarian, who demands that multiculturalism give way to "a nice blend of vanilla tapioca" (55). Thus P. Djèlí Clark's simplistic retrofit of Bradbury as an unswerving bigot: Clark, who, as a child, loved reading Ray Bradbury, now objects to his "allusions to fingerprints no longer being found on watermelons (yeah, that's right), or Black children at play described as 'pickaninnies rushing in clear water'" (June 7, 2012). In sum, Clark admits that he saw nothing wrong in *reading* such phrases but, nonetheless, faults Bradbury for *writing* them. After reading Clark's tweet, one of his followers[*] chimed: "Wish I [was] surprised that Ray Bradbury was racist, homophobic trash, but I'm not."

Yet, even a cursory reading of Bradbury's stories reveals that Bradbury's respective uses of denigrating language or images or philosophies serve his stories; indeed, as we have noted, often *anti*-racism is the keystone of the story. Consider, too, that this (apparently) suddenly bigoted writer had spent a lifetime inverting all manner of expectations. Studying the literary immortals he, nonetheless, wrote in genres that were often considered "trashy": science fiction, horror, and suspense, and often published his stories in suitable pulpy outlets: *Beyond, Detective Book, Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine, Fantastic, Fantastic Universe*, *Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*, *Manhunt*, *Planet Stories*, *Startling Stories*, *Super Science Stories*, *Thrilling Wonder Stories, Weird Tales*, etc., etc., and, yet, unlike virtually all of his contemporaries, he could also write for mainstream magazines—*Harper's*, *Collier's*, *Life*, *The Saturday Evening Post*, *Esquire*, etc., etc.—or even churn out scripts for television and film. Along the way, he was awarded the Rondo Hatton Classic Horror Hall of Fame Plaque, the Saturn Award, the Bram Stoker Lifetime Achievement Award, the Sir Arthur Clarke Award, the George Pal Memorial Award, the New York Film Critics Circle Award, the New Media Festival's Legend Award, two Ace Awards, the Ojai Film festival Lifetime Achievement Award, the O. Henry Memorial Award, the Benjamin Franklin Award, the PEN Center USA West Lifetime Achievement Award, the National Book Foundation Medal, the Writers Guild of America's Valentine Davies Award, National Medal of Arts, a Daytime Emmy, a Pulitzer Special Citation, a Peabody, and a star on Hollywood's Walk of Fame. He was also awarded three honorary doctorates, was made a Commandeur of France's Ordre des Arts et des Lettres, and had a literary prize named after him, as well as an asteroid—"9766 Bradbury."

Winning award after award, writing sublimely on the human condition or its reaction to alien conditions, Bradbury, in his later career was, in the versified words of poet Chaun Ballard, "nearly in danger of not being a danger." Cuddly, jowly, grandfatherly, Bradbury may have adopted strident, even socially repulsive, opinions to halt, perhaps even reverse, his new minting as a Man

[*] Jessica Price @Delafina777

of Letters (Ballard, July 18, 2019). He hints as much in an essay for the *Los Angeles Times Book Review* on Federico Fellini (November 27, 1977), in which he argues that Fellini's art had been hemmed in by his fame: he describes the filmmaker "helped by false friends we all find surrounding us, using up the area we need to breathe. Whether he knows it or not, Fellini is mobbed in by such friends who are the dumb enemies of his true self. […] The sooner Fellini gets back on the road [i.e., jettisons the very community that recognizes and defines him], […] the sooner his films will breathe again" ("Federico Fellini," 135-136). Likewise, in the aforementioned *Playboy* interview, Bradbury states that it is essential to his craft that he eschews "political correctness"; "these days, you have to be careful of both [conservatives and progressives]. They both want to control you" (271).

It may also be that we expect too much—a quintessentially American writer without the baggage of being quintessentially American. We would do well to keep in mind George Orwell's thoughts on the two archetypes of modern novelists: pre-World War II writers who follow their own muse—i.e. Art for Art's Sake; and, more recently bad writers—or what we would call "politically correct" writers—who abase themselves to the public, therefore making "mental honesty impossible" (352). Bradbury's stories fall into the former; they explore essential truths about who we are—poetic, intelligent, innocent; profane, stupid, and violent. The latter qualities are what he chose to adopt for the *Playboy* interview. This is not to say that Bradbury was any less essentially Bradbury in those moments. As Bryan Cranston wrote in his autobiography, *A Life in Parts*, the actor's craft is not to invent character but, rather, to release:

> all the things I was and all the things I might have been: all the side roads and the missteps. All the stuttering successes and the losses I thought might sink me. I was murderous and I was capable of great love. I was a victim, moored by circumstances, and I was a danger. I was Walter White.
>
> However, I was never more myself. (4)

Bradbury by the same token was not just his good characters; he contained multitudes, and those multitudes constituted his singular self. While he created his characters, Bradbury, like Cranston, was also affected by his art, by turns ennobled by his protagonists and ignobled by his antagonists. Whether writing of a trashed Earth or the promise of a new beginning on Mars, Bradbury, in his various characters was never more himself, but he was also, after each rendering, himself nevermore.

*

In the last section, I argued that Bradbury's racist views, while declarative, may also be (in part?) performative. That's a convenient argument, considering my deep interest in and high regard for his fiction. Certainly (most) fans (and critics!) of his fiction would prefer that he had never made any racially-charged utterance. Bradbury's good (defined here as well-constructed, artful, yes, even edifying) fictions do not negate his racism, nor vice versa. That said, dismissing Bradbury as a bigot obscures his contributions to a broader Afrofuturism, defined by Mark Dery as "speculative fiction that treats African American themes and addresses African American concerns in the context of 20th-century technoculture" (180).

To this we might add that Afrofuturism generally distinguishes itself in its attachment to the past. The musician and filmmaker Sun Ra, often cited as the father of Afrofuturism, explained that his mission in life was to get African Americans to help him colonize a planet in another star

system. If you haven't heard of this real-life, avant-garde jazz musician and his bizarre backstory, here is his breviloquent autobiography. Sun Ra (né, Herman Poole Blount) was just a normal man until one day:

> I landed on a planet that I identified as Saturn […] they [aliens] teleported me and I was down on [a] stage with them. They wanted to talk with me. They had one little antenna on each ear. A little antenna over each eye. They talked to me. They told me to stop [attending college] because there was going to be great trouble in schools […] the world was going into complete chaos […]. I would speak [through music], and the world would listen. That's what they told me. (Davis, 85)

Thereafter, as documented in his movie, *Space Is the Place* (1974), Sun Ra, in full Egyptian vesture, returns to Oakland, California. But Ra hasn't just returned from Saturn; he's also come from the past! As he explains to some Black kids: "I'm actually a presence sent to you by your ancestors."

Ra doesn't repudiate African history; he privileges it. The pyramids are, after all, in Africa, and his Egyptian name and dress restore the pyramids as a Black achievement. As such, he rebukes the likes of Samuel George Morton, a professor of anatomy and one of the founders of Pennsylvania Medical College, who, in 1844, concluded that "Negroes were numerous in Egypt, but their social position in ancient times was the same that it now is [in the United States], that of servants and slaves" (66). In 1851, John Campbell claimed that the pyramids were made by foreigners who were "Caucasian in race, and white men in color" (39); in 1854, Josiah C. Nott and George Glidden argued that the pyramids and those responsible for the glories of ancient Egypt were certainly "not *Negro*, nor akin to any Negroes" (225); in 1896, Flinders Petrie, studying hieroglyphics that clearly depicted some Egyptian rulers as Black, came up with a torturous logic. Egyptian depictions of Black Pharaohs, princes, and consorts were merely "symbolic"— and not in itself a confirmation of heritage (II: 335); at another point, he calculates that Nefertari, one of the most celebrated queens of Egypt, was likely "three-quarters black," but her brother, Aahmes, with his "ordinary Egyptian complexion" was "three-quarters Egyptian" (II:9). The assertion here is that Nefertari, Queen of Egypt, is not Egyptian because she is Black; her brother is Egyptian because he's white. Ra inverses this logic. When African American Jimmy Fey is uploaded to Ra's ship, his white parts are left on Earth, only his purely Black (i.e., Egyptian) identity is valued; the rest, presumably, is cast off. In the words of Sun Ra, "Black people are mythic, ancient or *cosmic*. They are the race for space" (Edwards, 32). In the black-keyed atonality of Sun Ra, Black ancient mythic *rites* homophonically prolepse into an interplanetary birth*right*:

> Find your place among the stars
> Get into this outer world's
> Rhythm, multiplicity
> Harmony, equational
> Melody horizon speed
> Astro black and cosmos dark
> Astro black mythology
> Astro timeless immortality
> Astro thought in mystic sound
> Astro black mythology. (Sun Ra, "Astro Black")

No discussion of Afrofuturism can fail to mention perhaps the most celebrated science-fiction novel of the late 20th century: Octavia Butler's *Kindred* (1979). In an interview with

Randall Kenan concerning the book's genesis, the author recalls a visit to George Washington's home at Mount Vernon: "Back then they had not rebuilt the slave cabins and the tour guide did not refer to slaves but to 'servants' and there was all this very carefully orchestrated dancing around the fact that it had been a slave plantation" (496). In Butler's novel, Dana travels back to the Antebellum deep south, and kills the slave owner who raped her ancestor (he also tries to rape Dana, thus adding incest to his many crimes). Similar to Sun Ra, who claims to be both from the future and the past, Dana returns newly-informed of her past *and* liberated from it. Returning to the present day, Dana trashes "everything […] that was even distantly related to the subject [of slavery]. [Their] versions of happy darkies in tender loving bondage were more than I could stand" (116).

Some of this may seem to be a world away from Bradbury's works, and I am not here claiming (nor would be, as a tenderfoot, qualified to claim) that Bradbury is a figurehead in the pantheon of Black science fiction. My point is that the elder Bradbury's comments on race are embarrassing, the younger Bradbury's use of a Black patois strikes us as clueless and offensive; yet in a story like "Way in the Middle of the Air," or "The Other Foot," we have a collapse of the timeline not unlike that of Ra and Butler. The future (i.e., high-tech Black enterprise) comes back to rescue the past (i.e., poor sharecroppers). While it would be untrue to say that both sides rescue each other, the intergenerational rescue is, nonetheless, a collective effort: the sharecroppers, emblematic of the African American experience, metaphorically plant the harvest of Afrofuturism. Whatever Bradbury's politics (which likely varied throughout his life), he imagined a world in which a single Black man had the moral fortitude to object to policies that seem to be inexorably leading to nuclear war; he imagined a radical world in which Black rocket scientists and sharecroppers were living in comity; he imagined a new exodus: Black men, women, and children abandoning a garbage heap of inhumanity. Their escape from one life into the next, from one world into the next, is not merely a miracle of money and ingenuity. The feat suggests a resilience that is, literally and metaphorically, otherworldly.

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Abstract

This essay explores how Ray Bradbury's stories reflect the intersections of race, space, and social injustice in post-apocalyptic settings. The stories "Way in the Middle of the Air" and "The Other Foot" deal overtly with race and prejudice, showing how African Americans are first driven to Mars and then, having fled there, must confront white refugees from Earth, offering a nuanced exploration of race, revenge, and reconciliation. "The Garbage Collector," while less overtly about race, also reveals systemic racial hierarchies.

Bradbury's works, while progressive for their time, remain complicated by the author's own later-life comments on race, yet they remain vital texts relating to Afrofuturism and post-racial narratives in science fiction.

Keywords Race, space, post-apocalyptic fiction, Afrofuturism, *The Martian Chronicles*, *The Illustrated Man*