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The Permanent Struggle for Racial Justice in the USA: Redeeming Derrick Bell's »The Space Traders«

Simon Lee-Price, Buckinghamshire New University, UK, simon.lee-price@bucks.ac.uk

Dieser Beitrag behandelt die erstmals 1989 veröffentlichte und seither kontrovers diskutierte SF-Kurzgeschichte »The Space Traders« des Wissenschaftsaktivisten und *critical-race*-Theoretikers Derrick Bell. In der Kurzgeschichte stimmt die weiße amerikanische Mehrheitsgesellschaft dafür, die afroamerikanische Bevölkerung im Tausch gegen finanzielle Mittel und fortgeschrittene Technologien an außerirdische Lebewesen auszuliefern. Der Beitrag diskutiert die Entwicklung des Werkes, das zunächst als pädagogischer Text im Rahmen juristischer Lern- und Lehrkontexte zur Anregung von Diskussionen sowie der Ausbildung eines rassismuskritischen Bewusstseins genutzt wurde. Ebenso wird seine Bedeutung als Teil von Bells mehrschichtiger fiktionaler Welt aus dialogischen Texten analysiert sowie auch der Einsatz von SF-Konventionen und genrespezifischen literarischen Mitteln. Der Artikel argumentiert, dass »Space Traders« einen Beitrag zur gegenwärtigen Diskussion über die Folgen der Sklaverei und den Kampf gegen ethnisch bedingte Ungleichheit leistet, indem das Werk die Geschichte von Rassismus im Hier und Jetzt verankert. So etabliert die Kurzgeschichte eine Art des Widerstands, die, basierend auf Bells aktivistischer Handlungsethik, einen fortwährenden dialogischen Austausch hervorhebt.

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In his science fiction short story »The Space Traders« (1992), scholar-activist and critical race theorist Derrick Bell (1930–2011) presents a disturbing scenario in which the overwhelming majority of white Americans vote to hand over their African American fellow citizens to visiting extra-terrestrials in exchange for gold and advanced technology. Bell called this story »a dire note« and hoped it would »emphasise the necessity of moving beyond the comforting belief that time and the generosity of its people will eventually solve America’s racial problem« (*Faces* 33). Not surprisingly, »Space Traders« provokes contrary and sometimes emotionally charged responses. The story has been condemned as an example of »Bell’s thesis [that] almost all whites are born evil« (Thernstrom and Thernstrom 496) or regarded as offering an excessively pessimistic view of the past and future of American race relations (Capers; Clark; Delgado and Stefancic). Others have commended the story for its bold realism (Anderson; Hoag; Higgins), and its pedagogic value and relevance continues to be recognised (Adams and Laughter; Onwuachi-Willig).¹ Reflecting the expansion of critical race theory to encompass LatCrit, TribalCrit, and AsianCrit theories, as well as the capacity of Bell’s work to stimulate productive critical dialogue – a contention of this present paper – Geiza Vargas-Vargas has offered a nuanced critique of the black–white racial binary that operates in »Space Traders« (131–142).

Bell, an author of conventional legal articles and a highly respected law textbook, wrote »Space Traders« because he regarded »literary models as a more helpful vehicle than legal precedent in a continuing quest for new directions in our struggle for racial justice« (*Faces* 15).² Yet, while generally acknowledging that »Space Traders« is literature, a work of science fiction, responses to the story typically focus on what the respective reader or scholar extracts as Bell’s argument, political position, or message and give only limited consideration to its literary features and utilisation of science fiction tropes and conventions.³ For example, »Space Traders« is discussed by Isiah Lavender III in

¹ Polls taken in classrooms where the story has been used as a learning resource consistently show that a large majority of African American students and a majority of white students think the outcome of the referendum in »Space Traders« is credible. (see Bell, »After«; Jungkunz; Russell-Brown).

² Bell’s short stories, most of which are of a speculative nature and liberally combine elements of science fiction and the fantastic and feature among other things extraterrestrials, time travel, a mysterious virus, and a magical island, are available in the following collections: *And We Are Not Saved: The Elusive Quest for Racial Justice* (1987); *Faces at the Bottom of the Well: The Permanence of Racism* (1992); *Gospel Choirs: Psalms of Survival for an Alien Land Called Home* (1996) and *Afrotlantica Legacies* (1998).

³ The reception of »Space Traders« and Bell’s fiction in general primarily with reference to its sociological or political content brings to mind the charge made by Bernard W. Bell of a tendency among readers and critics of African American fiction to give »inadequate attention [...] to such literary matters as genre, structure, style, characterization, and point of view« (xii). Henry Louis Gates, Jr. makes a similar charge, suggesting that texts by African American writers »were generally analysed almost exclusively in terms of their content, as if a literary form were a vacant enclosure that would be filled with this or that matter. This matter, moreover, was ›the Black Experience,‹ and an author tended to be judged on his or her fidelity to ›the Black Experience.‹ This, it seemed to me, was a dead end for black literary studies« (xxii).

Race in American Science Fiction (2011) but the ambitious scale of the study means that the analysis of the literary techniques used by Bell to draw »attention to the reality of our country's problem with race, how it is multilayered and enduring« (116) is necessarily constrained. Similarly, in a long article on space, science fiction, and African American exile, Michelle Commander provides what is essentially a summary of Bell's story to illustrate the necessity for African Americans to »utilize speculation as a technology by which to subvert their social marginalization« (430). Educationalists Chezare Warren and Justin Coles, on their part, turn to »Space Traders« for its recognition of the permanence of antiblack racism in the USA and its corresponding »invitation to ponder the liberatory potential of outer space – an ethereal universe completely unlike the U.S.« (383) with the objective of theorising and advocating for Black Education Spaces rather than analysing Bell's story as a work of literature or science fiction.

There are notable exceptions to this socio-political approach to reading the story, which fall broadly into two categories. One category consists of responses to »Space Traders« which are themselves works of science fiction and develop, rewrite or contribute a sequel to Bell's somewhat open-ended narrative. A prominent example of such a creative response is the adaptation of the story as a teleplay for HBO's *Cosmic Slop* (US 1994, Director: Reginald Hudlin) trilogy. The teleplay's divergence »in plot, character and dialogue« from the original,« for Julie Moody-Freeman, points to »intergenerational rifts regarding whether it is possible for blacks and their supporters to challenge racial oppression« (194; see also Brooks and Jacobs). »Space Traders« has thus spawned a body of creative responses that gives it a special status among legal stories. These creative responses are deserving of further analysis, but that undertaking is beyond the scope of the present paper.⁴

The other category of response consists of more or less conventional academic articles, which provide an analysis of the story as a work of science fiction. Writing in the journal *Science Fiction Studies*, Darryl A. Smith situates »Space Traders« in a tradition of African American speculative fiction that »signifies« (*à la* Henry Louis Gates, Jr.) on the »wider speculative genre« and approaches Bell's story with concepts from astrophysics to figure the undoing of black citizenship as an »Inverted« or »Negative Spike« event horizon (212–215). Smith's article usefully points to the ambivalence of the story – »either the grimmest or most merciful of the speculative depictions I discuss« – and

Unlike Bernard W. Bell, and to a lesser extent Gates, the intention of the present paper in invoking literariness is not to argue for the »merits« of African American authors and literary texts but to extend the parameters for interpreting »Space Traders« (Bernard W. Bell xii).

⁴ Examples of creative responses include Cann, Delgado and Stefancic, Russell-Brown, Wing. In some cases, both a creative and critical response is included in the same article. For a provocative discussion of the potential of »Space Traders« as fanfiction, especially in critical white studies, see Preston (57–63).

recognises its open-endedness – African Americans are dispatched to »an unknown fate« (212). More recently, in a comparative reading of »Space Traders« and Ray Bradbury's short story »Way in the Middle of the Air« (1950), Trent Masiki shows how both texts use »the defamiliarizing capacity of the speculative mode to examine separatism and integrationism as competing ideologies of African American pragmatism« (44).⁵ Significantly, in a concluding footnote, Masiki informs the reader that both Bradbury and Bell wrote sequels to their short stories but does not analyse them (44). Taking my cues from Masiki's valuable contribution, this paper seeks to move beyond a prevailing interpretive tendency in the scholarship on Bell's work, namely, the treatment of »Space Traders« as a self-contained and standalone narrative rather than one of a set of texts and part of an ongoing dialogic exchange.

In an early review of Bell's speculative fiction, which briefly considers »Space Traders«, Cheryl I Harris writes: »Bell does not provide solutions as much as he points toward a method of interrogation. Bell embraces seeming contradictions, raises dilemmas, initiating a dialectical mode of inquiry« (788).⁶ This present paper builds on Harris's astute observation. Taking account of the story's evolution from a legal hypothetical, its existence within Bell's multiple-story fictional world, and Bell's deployment of an African American female narrator and dialogue partner, the paper argues that »Space Traders« read in combination with its sequel »Redemption Deferred: Back to the Space Traders« (1996) challenges readers to think in new and often paradoxical ways about racism and resistance. This has implications for interpreting the ostensible exemplification in the story of Bell's controversial and provocative thesis that »racism is an integral, permanent, and indestructible component« of American society (*Faces* 15) – a thesis which, for Bell, is bound together with the ethical question of how African Americans can lead lives which have »purpose and worth« (*Ethical Ambition* 177).⁷ The notion of racism's permanence contained within Bell's thesis entails not

⁵ In analysing »Way in the Middle of the Air«, Masiki does not mention Bradbury's self-declared motive for writing the story that reveals a degree of racist wishful thinking: »If something upsets me with the colored situation, and [sic] I take the Negroes and I put them in rocket ships and send them off to Mars, in a short story, to rid myself of that tension« (Bradbury 11).

⁶ Arthur Austin in an analysis and evaluation of legal storytelling similarly argues that Bell's fictional work has a »dialogue potential« and is an »invitation for rebuttal« (519).

⁷ Bell's permanence of racism thesis (with reference to »Space Traders« it might also be formulated as the permanence of enslavement thesis) overlaps with a core tenet of Afropessimism: namely, that the »non-event of emancipation« did not bring about freedom but instead »reorganized domination [so that] the former slave became the racialized Black ›subject« who continues to face »open vulnerability to violence just as the slave did on the plantation« (*Afro-Pessimism* 8f.). While this present paper is informed by authors who have contributed to Afropessimism scholarship, such as Saidiya Hartman and Frank Wilderson, it is beyond its scope to enter into a comparative analysis of Bell's pessimism and Afropessimism and their points of divergence. For example, it is uncertain whether Bell would draw the same hard ontological distinction between racisms and ›anti-Blackness‹ that Wilderson does. Bell was already approaching the end of his writing career when the term Afropessimism obtained its current meaning in African American Studies and

only an interpretation of the past and present but also speculation about the future, something for which the genre of science fiction provides distinctive resources. In particular, the paper draws on Fredric Jameson's influential postulation in »Progress vs. Utopia« (1982), that science fiction narratives ostensibly about the future are in fact intended to make the present – the here-and-now – knowable through techniques of projection and defamiliarization as well as on George Taylor's readings of Bell's stories as parables that seek to disorient readers and destabilise familiar understandings of historical progress. The paper proposes that »Space Traders« is less concerned with forecasting the future course of racism in the USA than with making racism's unfolding history manifest in the present and encouraging modes of resistance that encompass both the personal and collectively political.

From Legal Hypo to Bestseller: Evolution of »Space Traders«

»Space Traders« has an unusual evolution for a work of commercial science fiction. It began as a story that Bell would read with students in his first year Harvard Law School class to help them better comprehend the deep relationship between racism and the law in the United States (Bell, »Who's Afraid?« 902; Contreras 19). It functioned, then, in part, as a legal hypothetical or hypo, a speculative scenario designed to provoke a jurisprudential discussion on a particular topic – very often an emotive or moral topic. Using Bell's own terminology, Colette Cann classifies »Space Traders« as a »racial hypo« (together with W. E. B. Du Bois's science fiction short story »The Comet«), since it addresses wider social and political issues surrounding race relations, issues that are typically excluded from conventional legal hypos and can make an important contribution outside law classes in educating about racism (105).

The use of hypos as a pedagogical tool to develop students' analytical thinking about how the constitution, legislation and legal precedent might be interpreted and applied has a long tradition in US law schools. »Space Traders«, as a work of science fiction, represents, perhaps, a logical development of the hypo as an intrinsically speculative genre. Indeed one of the best-known hypos, Lon Fuller's »The Case of the Speluncean Explorers« written in 1949, which uses the emotive subject of cannibalism to test different theories of statutory interpretation, unfolds in the distant future in another world and thus, in its temporality and setting, already exhibited features associated with science fiction and fantastic literature.⁸ »Space Traders«, in keeping with

he appears not to have used the term in his work; significantly, neither *Afro-Pessimism: An Introduction* nor Wilderson's *Afropessimism* makes any reference to Bell.

⁸ Fuller's Cave hypo was revisited in a 1993 symposium which included legal interpretations informed by feminism and critical race theory (Kahn et al.). Such minoritarian interpretations raise fundamental (and for some troubling) questions about the ownership of a hypo and what narrative »facts« (Shapiro 1842) can legitimately be considered.

its evolution from a hypo, makes extensive reference to the US Constitution, statutory law and legal precedent and contains relevant citations and endnotes.

A version of »Space Traders« was published in 1990 in *Rutgers Law Review* in response to a forum held the year before on Bell's first short story collection *And We are Not Saved* published in 1987.⁹ Four of the stories in that first collection had previously been published in Bell's long foreword to the Supreme Court issue of the prestigious *Harvard Law Review* in 1985, which radically broke with tradition in expressing »jurisprudential matters of significant importance in a language and format more usual in literature than in law« (Bell, *Saved* xii), even if the said stories bear a structural resemblance to a typical legal argument. In 1992, a revised and extended version of »Space Traders« appeared in Bell's second short story collection and bestseller, *Faces at the Bottom of the Well: The Permanence of Racism*; this version has become the standard text and is the one referred to in this paper. Bell republished the story in 1999 in the academic journal *Legal Studies Forum* under the title »The Power of Narrative«; in his introduction, he described the story as a »racial parable written in science fiction form« and referred to its reception history in the light of the popularity of TV series such as *STAR TREK* and *THE X-FILES* (Bell, » Power« 315).

This brief overview of the story's evolution over more than a decade should illustrate that »Space Traders« took shape in a variety of contexts (classrooms, conferences, law journals), the text serving specific but non-exclusive purposes (pedagogic, political, as innovation in disciplinary and jurisprudential discourse). Taking account of these contexts and purposes can enable a deeper appreciation and more nuanced interpretation of the story and also raise awareness of the criteria upon which judgments of literary and aesthetic significance are based. For example, lawyer and legal educator Beverly Charles hailed Bell's first collection of short stories as »a brilliant literary achievement« (335). This evaluation is in part attributable to Charles' ability to read the stories »from a lawyer's perspective« and to recognise, for instance, that Bell's use of dialogue »resembles the Socratic method lawyers gain familiarity with in law school« (335). In contrast, a *New York Times* reviewer simply described Bell's dialogues as »stilted« (Lewis n. p.). Charles further considers how »thespians, historians [and] politicians« (335) might differently value Bell's text according to their professional and disciplinary training and priorities. She points to Bell's use of »a version of the Greek chorus to elicit the import of each of the tales« (335), his deployment of time travel to examine the founding of the USA, and his provision of a mode of analysis attentive to

⁹ Another shorter version of »Space Traders« appeared in *Rutgers Law Review* 42.1 (Fall 1989) 96–100, under the title »Racism: A Prophecy for the Year 2000«.

the racialised impact of legislation and policy. Charles' expansive understanding of literary appreciation with regard to Bell informs the present reading of »Space Traders«.

Fictional Context

Bell's short stories – or »chronicles« as Bell calls them in *Saved*¹⁰ – are typically narrated from within a fictional context: that is, the story proper or titular story is embedded within a framing narrative which tells where, when, how, and by whom the story is narrated and incorporates responses to and interpretations of that story.¹¹ An important point to note is that the unnamed narrator of the framing narrative almost never features as the author or originator of the story proper but rather as its recorder and propagator. All but one of the stories in the first two collections are communicated to this narrator, often verbally, by the »fictional heroine« and »lawyer-prophet« Geneva Crenshaw (Bell, *Faces* ix).¹² The mode of storytelling employed by Bell produces a number of effects, among which are to problematise notions of authorial voice, responsibility, and intent.

Crenshaw is a fully fleshed-out character, even if she remains fundamentally mysterious and significant gaps exist in her biography. Once a colleague of the narrator in the civil rights struggles of the 1960s, she was almost killed by a white supremacist while campaigning in the South and lay in a coma for two decades. Finally recovered, she has re-established contact with the narrator and now claims to be one of a trio of black »Sisters«, with otherworldly powers, who preside as a »Celestial Curia« over an international assembly of social reform activists.¹³ Crenshaw receives prophetic dreams, has the uncanny habit of turning up from out of nowhere and just as suddenly disappearing without a trace, and she is able to travel through time. Hinting, perhaps, at reincarnation or the transmigration of souls, Bell's narrator describes Crenshaw as

¹⁰ Bell also refers to his short stories as »allegorical stories« (*Faces* ix) and »parables« (*Gospel Choirs* 12, 38). The back cover blurb on the 1989 edition of *Saved* markets the short stories as »dramatic fables and dialogues«.

¹¹ Bell's short stories might usefully be comprehended within the »legacy of black metafiction« analysed by Madelyn Jablon. The two manifestations of metafiction identified by Jablon that appear most pertinent to Bell's work are stories that describe or reflect on the »process of creating a story« and stories that »encourage audience participation« through strategies such as call-and-response and thereby »involve the reader in the self-conscious construction of the fictive world«, for which, Jablon suggests, the detective novel and science fiction are particularly suitable (26f.). As discussed earlier, readers of »Space Traders« have given their critical and creative responses to Bell's call by writing short stories of their own.

¹² It has been suggested that Bell modelled Geneva Crenshaw on Kimberlé Crenshaw, the prominent critical race theory scholar and activist and one of the originators of the concept of intersectionality. According to Jelani Cobb, Bell »told Kimberlé Crenshaw that he had ›borrowed‹ her surname for the character, who was a composite of Black women lawyers who had influenced his thinking« (n. p.).

¹³ Crenshaw gives the fullest account of her adoption by and experiences with the Celestial Curia in chapters 2 and 10 of *Saved*.

»the embodiment of the great nineteenth-century abolitionists Harriet Tubman and Sojourner Truth, even resembling photographs I'd seen of those stern black women who both fought and spoke for their cause« (Bell, *Saved* 19). Responding to this description of herself, Crenshaw says drolly, »were I given to vanity I would hardly find the resemblance complimentary« (19). Such playfully adversarial and gender-inflected dialogue is typical of the narratives and helps establish Crenshaw's autonomy from Bell as author and narrator. During an interview about his storytelling, Bell said people often ask him how his heroine is doing and when he saw her last, to which questions he typically replies: »She's fine but not happy when I call her fictional« (Goldberg 58). Stephanie Vastine proposes that Crenshaw functioned as a »womanist muse« for Bell and »blurred the line between fiction and reality [making it] impossible to know whether or not Geneva's influence on Bell was the product of literal divine translation or the result of an active imagination« (246). For Vastine, Crenshaw enables an otherworldly and spiritual dimension to enter Bell's thinking and writing about the struggle for racial justice.

The fictional context of the titular stories or chronicles (their embeddedness within a framing narrative) should be considered when interpreting them. Indeed, the first interpreters of the chronicles are Crenshaw and the framing narrator who should not be identified with Bell, even if Bell sometimes playfully blurs the boundaries in interviews. In the framing narrative, the two debate the featured chronicle from jurisprudential and tactical perspectives, with passion, irony, and humour. They draw on a shared history and culture as African Americans and their experiences in the struggle for racial justice, but there is also a recognition of their differences, especially with regard to gender. Significantly, it is the framing narrator who is sometimes accused by Crenshaw of remaining trapped in the dominant civil rights narrative of steady historical progress and being naively optimistic about the prospects for achieving racial justice. Most often their protracted and heated exchanges end inconclusively and without their reaching agreement, which suggests readers are being encouraged to take up the discussion themselves and continue the creative activity of interpreting the chronicles. Importantly, by means of the framing narrative, readers are also made aware that interpreters are socially and historically positioned subjects, with their own interests, motives, and habits of seeing, hearing and reading. It might be said that, for Bell, interpretations are always *partial* in both senses of the word: subjective and incomplete.

»Space Traders« can be called a chronicle insofar as it is formatted as seventeen dated entries from the near future with respect to the time it was written. Untypically for Bell's short stories, it is not embedded in a traditional framing narrative but

presented as a standalone short story, giving the impression of greater objectivity. It is, however, immediately followed by the book's epilogue that functions as a type of framing narrative. Written in the form of an address to Crenshaw it indicates she is the chronicle's author, while Bell's narrator provides his response. Titled »Beyond Despair«, the epilogue attends to the chronicle's pessimism and seeks to outline a strategy for African American survival in the face of permanent racial oppression and the ever-present threat to black lives. In so doing, Bell's narrator calls attention to the precariousness of contemporary civil rights gains and draws an analogy with the abolitionist struggle, reminding Crenshaw and, indirectly, the book's readers, that the »underground railroad ran in both directions« and that while some enslaved Africans did manage to escape to liberty in the North, the Southern states operated an elaborate system of slave catchers to »kidnap free blacks from their homes or the streets, and spirit them off to the South and a life in bondage« (Bell, *Faces* 196). Through the condensed imagery and wordplay in this short sentence, Bell exhibits his characteristic equivocalness and ironic stance toward the idea of progress in racial justice, depicting a two-way transportation system that simultaneously carries blacks out of and back into slavery, and chiasmatically turns around the meaning of the expression »to spirit off«, conventionally associated with escaping to freedom, to describe being returned to bondage. Such an ambivalent conceptualisation of the progress made toward racial justice, expressed in puns and wordplay, rather than straightforward denial, is not unique to Bell. Indeed, it might be considered a feature of African American »signifying«, practised by »he who dwells at the margins of discourse, ever punning, ever troping, ever embodying the ambiguities of language [...] our trope for repetition and revision [...] of chiasmus itself, repeating and reversing simultaneously as he does in one deft discursive act« (Gates 236).¹⁴ The epilogue regarded as a genre can be seen to function within this discourse of equivocation, for by the very act of adding to or extending »Space Traders«, Bell points to the chronicle's inconclusiveness and, so to speak, invites further responses and interpretations. Paradoxically, rather than providing closure, a final signified, one epilogue paves the way for another in an ongoing dialogue and, as noted, Bell felt drawn to write a sequel to »Space Traders« several years after the chronicle's original publication and the many and varied responses to it.

¹⁴ An example of signifying pertinent to this context is Malcolm X's referring to the states located north of the Mason-Dixon line as »Up South« and thereby disrupting at a linguistic level – and with humour – the conventional (and to some reassuring) view that the more enlightened (up) North, unlike the benighted (down) South, had made substantial progress toward ending racism (Smitherman 115).

Acts of Interpretation

Interpretation is a prominent theme in »Space Traders« and also in Bell's other short stories. As Crenshaw explains in an email to Bell's narrator in the prologue of *Saved*: »To be made real, to be potent, these visions – or Chronicles, as I call them – must be interpreted. I have chosen you to help me in this vital task« (Bell, *Saved* 22). In keeping with their affiliation with legal hypotheticals, the stories are often based upon speculative interpretations of aspects of American law, and much of the narrative of »Space Traders« unfolds with careful reference to sections of the constitution, legislation, and legal precedents that deal with slavery and the status of African Americans and other minorities. The chronicle closes with black Americans being herded toward the Traders' gigantic spacecraft at gunpoint, with their »[h]eads bowed, arms now linked by slender chains«, to leave »the New World as their forebears had arrived« (Bell, *Faces* 194). This ending demonstrates dramatically the relative ease with which, through textual reinterpretation, American law could be deployed to make the apparently unthinkable happen: a trade made with extra-terrestrials using African American lives to benefit the white majority.

Bell's graphic depiction of African Americans returned to the legal status of chattel slaves – property to be exploited and exchanged – confronts readers with what Saidiya Hartman calls the »afterlife of slavery« (*Lose Your Mother* 6), a conceptualisation that requires a radical rethinking of conventional historical periodisation and grand narratives of emancipation and progress and serves as a reminder that »black lives are still imperilled and devalued by a racial calculus and a political arithmetic that were entrenched centuries ago« (6). In »Space Traders«, interpretations and perceptions are shown to be conditioned by the ›colour line‹, to the extent that white and black Americans see, hear, and read the world differently, and consequently form distinct interpretive communities, to borrow a concept from Stanley Fish. For example, the extra-terrestrials who are able to communicate in English are described as speaking in the »familiar comforting tones of former President Ronald Reagan« (Bell, *Faces* 159). Reagan, who had just left office at the time the story was first published and had advocated for a futuristic missile defence system nicknamed the ›Star Wars program‹, was hailed as ›The Great Communicator‹. He was also renowned for ›dog whistling‹, that is, for using coded language to talk to white America about race and to reproduce stereotypes of African Americans as criminals and shiftless welfare recipients.¹⁵ From the very outset, white Americans in Bell's story perceive the extra-terrestrial visitors as »unthreatening« and even compare them to the »good-guy characters in comic

¹⁵ For an extended discussion of the significance of Reagan in »The Space Traders« see Moody-Freeman 198f.

books«, whereas African Americans see them as »distinctly unpleasant, even menacing« (Bell, *Faces* 161). By pointing to the collective anxiety felt specifically by African Americans about the arrival of the Space Traders, Bell gives expression to »the sense and awareness of precarity; the precarities of the afterlives of slavery« (Sharpe 5) and builds racialised narrative tension, hinting at what is soon to be confirmed when the Traders make their horrifying offer. Jewish Americans, too, interpret events and the proposed trade within the frame of their own cultural and traumatic historical experiences, one rabbi condemning the trade as »America’s version of the Final Solution« (Bell, *Faces* 186). A radical Jewish American group even sets up an »Anne Frank committee« to hide African Americans (186), but to no avail.

The polarisation of perceptions on either side of the colour line is at once a condition of and an enduring theme in representations of American experience and scholarship on the topic. In their book *America in Black and White* (1999), which makes several references to Bell, Abigail and Stephan Thernstrom argued that the tendency of many African Americans to complain about racism as a pervasive problem in U.S. society and their claims to see the legacy of slavery in their daily lives amount to a »bewildering distortion of the present« (495).¹⁶ It is not just that the Thernstroms claimed to be able to identify a distinctly black interpretation of the experience of living in the United States at the end of the twentieth century, an experience which they deemed to be distorted, it is also that the Thernstroms’s judgment is itself a product of their own racialised subject position with its associated habits and frames of perception and interpretation; the perspective of the Thernstroms can appear objective or universal only because a white supremacist society privileges it as the norm.¹⁷ Confronted by a black interpretation of contemporary America, alien to what they as white Americans of European descent know and understand, the Thernstroms literally lose their way: they are *bewildered*. They find their way again by condemning such alienating interpretations and mention »Space Traders« by name as an example of reverse racism (496f.). In »Space Traders«, acts of interpretation, whether of legislation, history, or the intentions of extra-ter-

¹⁶ Afropessimist scholarship bases itself on precisely such a mode of interpretation. In his account of a closed-group discussion among African Americans, Wilderson contends: »The time of chattel slavery was the time of our lives. And this was not a problem, as some psychoanalysts would have it, of neurotic conflation between the imaginary and the symbolic. It was a collective recognition that the time and space of chattel slavery shares essential aspects with the time and space, the violence, of our modern lives« (205). Critiquing the tendency in African American Studies to collapse the past into the present, Kenneth W. Warren writes: »it is my contention here that to understand both past and present, we have to put the past behind us« (84).

¹⁷ The Thernstroms are employing what Eduardo Bonilla-Silva has diagnosed as an American »racial grammar«. Among other things, racial grammar makes whiteness invisible and »provides the ›deep structure‹, the ›logic‹ and ›rules‹ of proper composition of racial statements and, more importantly, of what can be seen, understood, and even felt about racial matters« (174).

restrials, are shown to be inevitably conditioned by race, especially the black-white binary. Interpretation is both a major theme within the story and something the story, when considered as a set of texts, performs upon itself. Crenshaw states in her prologue that the chronicles she narrates can only become real through the process of interpretation. She is addressing Bell's narrator, her partner in dialogue; but perhaps it is to Bell's readers she is ultimately speaking.

Dystopias and Progress

The profound differences between black and white interpretations and perceptions of the USA have sometimes been articulated using science fiction tropes and motifs. The jazz musician Sun Ra, for example, whose futuristic music and performances riffed off the *zeitgeist* of the ›Space Age‹, expressed his alienation from a brutally racially segregated society by claiming to be neither human nor a part of planet Earth and instead to belong to ›the angel race‹ (Youngquist 8). He told stories about having been contacted by extra-terrestrials and transported to Saturn through a process of ›transmolecularization‹, where he received knowledge that would rescue the world (9). The experience of the Middle Passage has been compared to an abduction by aliens, and the ensuing technologized violence of chattel slavery and Jim Crow, the brainwashing erasure of black history, and the medical experimentation on black bodies, such as the infamous Tuskegee syphilis study, has led some to claim, with justification, that African Americans ›inhabit a sci-fi nightmare‹ (Dery 180). According to Alex Zamalin, ›much of black American life has been nothing short of dystopian. [...] Some of the most dark science fiction fantasies couldn't do justice to such egregious injustice‹ (Black Utopia 6). Bell's explicitly political science fiction takes these forms of racial injustice as its themes.

Set in the near future of readers in the late 80s and early 90s, ›Space Traders‹ features recognisably dystopic elements. The extra-terrestrials arrive in an America that is suffering from the ravages of environmental pollution. The economy is teetering on the verge of bankruptcy and America is ›struggling to survive like any third-world nation‹ (Bell, *Faces* 162). The impact on African Americans is especially devastating. More than half of the demographic have become ›outcasts‹ (163), confined to former inner-city areas that are now surrounded by high walls with exit and entrance controlled by armed guards. There is a clear analogy here both with the ghettoization of Jews in European countries under Nazi rule, especially in Poland, and the disproportionately high incarceration rate of African Americans in the U. S. prison system at the time of the story's publication. This dystopic near-future, whose outlines are readily discernible in the present, provides the turbulent context in which the extra-terrestrials's offer of gold, safe nuclear fuel, and antipollutant chemicals is made to appear all the more enticing.

Bell's creation in »Space Traders« of a future dystopia as a means of rendering the concerns of the present bears further discussion with reference to what Fredric Jameson has argued about the temporal structure and literary devices found in many science fiction narratives. In his influential essay, Jameson warns against a tendency to oppose the »narrative fantasies which a collectivity entertains about its past and its future«, fantasies which may contain elements of myth, archetype, and projection, to »»concepts« like progress or cyclical return, which can somehow be tested for their objective or even scientific validity« (147f.). Jameson urges that readings of science fiction texts transcend this dichotomous mode of thinking and instead seek to reveal »the outlines of some deeper and vaster narrative movement in which the groups of a given collectivity at a certain historical conjuncture anxiously interrogate their fate, and explore it with hope or dread« (148). For Jameson, representations in science fiction stories of near or distant futures function not as predictions or preparation for what is to come but rather as a means to »defamiliarize and restructure our experience of our own *present*« (151, original emphasis). Following Jameson, then, »Space Traders« ought not to be interpreted primarily in terms of its adequacy to customary norms of understanding. The end goal should not be to verify or falsify the story's supposed truth claims by close reference to historical or social facts, which is how the Thernstroms and other positivistically orientated critics proceed. The ostensibly pessimistic »Space Traders«, which dramatizes Bell's thesis of the permanence of American racism, and what Sharpe calls »the continuous and changing present of slavery's as yet unresolved unfolding« (14) is, following Jameson, neither descriptive nor predictive but rhetorical; in keeping with the radicalism of critical race theory storytelling, it aims to »destroy[...] mindsets« and to »shatter complacency and challenge the status quo« (Delgado 2413f.). While optimistic narratives risk encouraging a complacent faith in historical progress, Bell's provocative pessimism alerts readers to the here-and-now – Jameson's »intolerable present of history« which »is all we have« (Jameson 151f.) – as a site of ongoing struggle.¹⁸

¹⁸ Aida Levy-Hussen's concept of »traumatic time« as that which »defies chronological mapping and instead takes shape through repeated, affectively charged references to an original traumatic event« might also be useful to read »Space Traders« in so far as the story contests historical progress and stages a return to, or repetition of, enslavement (20). Levy-Hussen developed the concept of traumatic time to address the historical turn in African American literature, exemplified by Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, with slavery as the ultimate traumatic event. While »Slave Traders« is ostensibly about the future, as »a neo-slave narrative« (Masiki 38) it can also be viewed in the context of the historical turn: the sci-fi trope of an encounter with extra-terrestrials providing the temporal rupture that in other fiction is brought about by »haunting, possession, time travel, fantasy, dreams, and flights of the imagination« (20). Significantly, for Levy-Hussen, it is »the premature decline of the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements [...] experienced as a historically resonant psychic injury that reactivates the unresolved, original wound of slavery« (11f.). The displacement of a profound disillusionment with, and grieving over, the civil rights movement onto the traumatic event of slavery clearly has relevance for interpreting the pessimism of Bell, especially as it is articulated in »Space Traders«.

Like this present paper, George Taylor, too, argues for interpretations of Bell's stories based on their »literary character«, which, for Taylor, means reading them as parables (225). Parables, Taylor contends, drawing on hermeneutic scholarship of the New Testament, »should be read based on the criteria of manifestation – the manifestation of new knowledge and insight – rather than on the basis of adequation – to existing norms and knowledge« (227). To elucidate his argument, Taylor uses the example of the parable of the Good Samaritan. For the original audience of the parable, Jewish listeners coming in contact with the texts of early Christianity, a Samaritan was »a hated enemy, a half-breed, a perverter of true religion« (233). The parable thus »ask[ed] the listener to put together for the same person two contradictory words: ›Samaritan‹ and ›neighbor.‹ [...]The literal conflict turn[ed] over the listener's world and challenge[d] its presumptions« (235). The parable of the Good Samaritan, then, is not merely an »allegory of charitable action«, Taylor demonstrates, but a »language event« that through its linguistic juxtaposition of opposed concepts leads the listener to »experience a new reality« (235). Applying this mode of hermeneutical reading to »Space Traders«, Taylor moves beyond evaluating the story in terms of the adequacy of its representation of current history and the future history to which it alludes and attends instead to the story's rhetoric of juxtaposition: as he suggests, the story »simultaneously asks us to confront the fact that history operates in the present and may presage our future. [...] [I]t reverses the assumed view of progress toward racial harmony and requires us to face the role of white self-interest in our nation's decisions« (250).

One way in which »Space Traders« disrupts the idea of progress and foregrounds the role of white self-interest is through the dramatization of the origins and evolution of American law. Perhaps the most unsettling and disorienting aspect of »Space Traders« is the astonishing speed at which the events unfold. In a matter of just seventeen days (and here the story's chronicle format comes into its own, the compressed historical timeline providing the tension of a countdown) more than 20 million American citizens, men, women and children, are herded together to be handed over against their will as payment to extra-terrestrials in a transaction that is—in legal terms—fully constitutional and socially sanctioned. If the depiction of (ab)uses of science and technology for oppressive or inhumane ends is a common feature of science fiction narratives (especially dystopian ones), then American law and the associated democratic institutions and mechanisms take over this generic function in »Space Traders«, generating anxiety and dread. Just as Enlightenment science was thought to lead to ever more social advancement and ever greater emancipation but ultimately afforded the ideological and practical tools for more effective forms of domination, genocide, and

increasingly destructive wars, so, in »Space Traders«, the law, ostensibly intended to protect life, liberty and property, is revealed – from an African American perspective – as effecting the very opposite. In fact, it is precisely the designation in the constitution of enslaved Africans as *property* which provides the story's (and the USA's) unresolved ›racial problem‹. In »Space Traders« the manifestation of the law as a violently oppressive technology – as a weapon, so to speak – is starkly apparent in how it is used to disarm all African American citizens prior to the referendum on their fate, and in the final scene as, with full legality, 20 million African Americans are marched at gun point by the military to the waiting spacecraft.

Bell's projection of a dystopic near future, in which a disavowed past repeats itself, makes manifest in the here-and-now of the reader what might be called the ever present transhistorical threat to black life and liberty embodied in the supposedly colour-blind U. S. Constitution and law as well as in supposedly non-racist U.S. democratic institutions and mechanisms.¹⁹ Bell is alert to all the paradoxes and conundrums that arise from the coexistence of proclamations of universality and racialised experience under white supremacy – the many »contradictory dimensions [that] defy understanding« (Bell, *Saved* 17). As the pro-trade advocates in the story argue, without the compromises with slave-owners contained in the Constitution of 1787 that assigned African Americans the status of non-citizens and legal property, America would not exist. Yet this very same constitution provided the »framework under which those opposed to slavery could continue the struggle that eventually led to the Civil War and emancipation« (Bell, *Faces* 188f.). Now, in the year 2000, at another pivotal moment in the country's history, the constitution is again brought into play to decide the future of African Americans, whose equal citizenship it formally guarantees. With bleak irony, Bell exposes an insidious form of reasoning on the part of those in favour for the trade which holds that it is as »highly regarded citizens« with rights and duties (179), and not as a subordinated racial group, that African Americans are required to make a patriotic sacrifice, if necessary, of their lives, for the future survival and prosperity of their country.²⁰

¹⁹ Responding to »Space Traders« shortly after its first publication in a law journal, one legal scholar wrote: »The Chronicle, in fact, asks a very basic question that is sorely in need of an answer today - what happens when ›We the People‹ decide, on a racial basis, to sacrifice the rights of some of us to a higher interest?« (Middleton 447). He concludes only with the hope »that when given the opportunity to decide upon the fate of African-Americans, ›We the People‹ will have the leadership to explain, and the foresight to understand and balance, all significant concerns« (449).

²⁰ It is no surprise, perhaps, that Bell was deeply affected by Ursula K. Le Guin's short story »The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas«, in which the »abominable misery« of an imprisoned and physically abused child guarantees the prosperity and happiness for a whole community, and that he saw in the story analogies with the African American transhistorical predicament of being sacrificed for the sake of white racial bonding and the nation (*Faces* 155).

Several times in the story mention is made of how the gold from the trade will enable the US to erase its massive debt. If African Americans have been specially singled out to pay off this debt, then the alleged patriotic duty assigned to them might be comprehended in terms of what Hartman has diagnosed as the burden of »indebtedness« that African Americans are perceived to carry, an indebtedness instituted by emancipation and the sacrifice of white lives in the Civil War on their behalf (*Race and American Culture* 131). Hartman argues:

Blame and duty and blood and dollars marked the birth of the free(d) subject. The very bestowal of freedom established the indebtedness of the freed through a calculus of blame and responsibility that mandated that the formerly enslaved both repay this investment of faith and prove their worthiness. (131)

The implicit requirement of African Americans continually to demonstrate their worth as citizens in the face of white scepticism is made explicit in »Space Traders« when the white pro-trade Secretary of the Interior advises Gleason Golightly – the aptly named conservative African American economics professor and presidential advisor – how to promote the deal with the Traders to African Americans:

> [...] talk about patriotism, about the readiness of black people to make sacrifices for this country, about how they are really worthy citizens no matter what some may think. [...] Isn't sacrifice as proof of patriotism what your Frederick Douglass argued to get President Lincoln to open up the Union army to black enlistees?« (Bell, *Faces* 172)

The references to historical political figures associated with the abolition of slavery as well as with the Civil War in the Secretary's appeal is crucial here. Indebtedness requires a reconceptualization of the experience of time, »since what is owed draws the past into the present, and suspend[s] the subject between what has been and what is« (Hartman, *Race and American Culture* 131). In portraying the African American condition of indebtedness as stretching from the past into the future and as foundational in a trade with beings from beyond the Earth, Bell reveals how, for African Americans, freedom, citizenship, and emancipatory progress always coexist with the obligation, ultimately, to pay with their lives.

Bell's Ethics of Resistance

Bell advocates taking up the struggle for racial justice, regardless of the likelihood of achieving success. Indeed, he suggests that entertaining the permanence thesis can protect an individual against the »disabling despair« (*Faces* ix) resulting from inev-

itable defeats and setbacks. It is the very act of fighting back against oppression and not success itself that ultimately makes a person »triumphant« (xxii). While Bell's evaluation of what counts as a triumph can be disputed,²¹ the importance he attaches to the affective aspect of engaging in resistance is one that is shared by other African American activists, artists, and scholars. For example, Alex Zamalin regards a »resister« as being often »possessed by some feeling, whether joy and ecstasy or pessimism and anguish« (*Struggle* 9). Crucially, Zamalin suggests, resistance is not only aimed at achieving measurable results but can embrace a utopian or uchronic dimension:

The resister challenges what is practical and illuminates what isn't, juxtaposing what encourages human flourishing with what disables it. The resister grapples with the question of means and ends – the question of the norms of action – while trying to create a new language for a future that doesn't yet exist. (9)

Developing Zamalin's contention about creating a new language, Bell might be regarded as using science fiction to extend the discursive possibilities for talking about African American resistance. In the epilogue discussed earlier, Bell's narrator closes by quoting from the spiritual »When the Saints Go Marching In«, saying to Crenshaw that he »wants to be in that number«, thereby indicating his commitment to being part of a collective history of »unremitting struggle« that is »still unfolding« and »leaves no room for giving up« (*Faces* 200). Struggling for collective goals, even while acknowledging the likelihood of defeat, for Bell, enables a person to lead an ethical and meaningful life. Bell outlines this challenging ethical stance in one of his last works, *Ethical Ambition*:

Our lives gain purpose and worth when we recognize and confront the evils we encounter [...] and meet them with a determination to take action even when we are all but certain that our efforts will fail. For in rising to those challenges, there is no failure. Rather there is the salvation of spirit, of mind, of soul. (177)

As well as drawing on a tradition of African American resistance reaching back to slavery, in which religion and the spirituals play an inspirational role, Bell's ethics is

²¹ The example of triumph in struggle Bell provides is of an elderly African American civil rights activist he met in Mississippi in 1964 who described herself as »liv[ing] to harass white folks« (*Faces* xii), while at the same time, according to Bell, recognising she was almost powerless against entrenched white power. For Clark, this interpretation is merely an attempt by Bell »to avoid the despair which he knows naturally flows from his thesis« (25). Jeffrey B. Ferguson cautions against the tendency »to find resistance of one sort or another in nearly every aspect of black American culture and social organization, but in such small and subtle quantities that they appear to make very little difference« (10).

also influenced by the anticolonial work of Franz Fanon and the stoical existentialism of Albert Camus. In both authors Bell discovers a rhetoric of paradox, a seemingly unwarranted faith in agency in the face of overwhelming adversity. Thus, for Bell, Camus encourages self-confirming defiance even in the certainty of »complete annihilation« (*Faces* x.). Fanon he regards as »enormously pessimistic in the *victory* sense« (x, original emphasis), a victory achieved through creative self-invention against the apparent »inviolability of the racial order« (x). To draw a loose analogy with Jean Paul Sartre's existentialism, Bell's ethics involves rejecting the ›bad faith‹ or inauthenticity of, on the one hand, succumbing to a general sense of hopelessness, and, on the other hand, clinging to false hopes (unwarranted faith in progress toward social and racial justice).²² This bad faith dichotomy which confronts African Americans can be transcended, Bell's writings suggest, by making a free choice to fight back against oppression.

Published in 1996 in the short story collection *Gospel Choirs*, the sequel to »Space Traders«, »Redemption Deferred: Back to the Space Traders«, opens with a dramatic Netflix-worthy plot twist. The extra-terrestrials reveal themselves not to be neo-slavers and instead offer the millions of African Americans on board the spacecraft a life of full equality and partnership on their planet. Both the narrator and Crenshaw are among the passengers: Crenshaw, according to the extra-terrestrials, is there »by circumstances strange beyond even our knowledge« (Bell, »Redemption« 23), a recognition that enhances her characterisation as otherworldly. Although the story is attributed to Crenshaw, who announces in the collection's prologue, »I have a story to start your new book. [...] By the way, you are in it, too« (16), »Redemption« is related by Bell's narrator in the first person. The framing and telling of this story are elaborate, even by Bell's standards, complicating authorship and problematising who is ultimately speaking. It features a mind-boggling array of storytellers: Bell as the real-world author, Bell as two intradiegetic narrators, operating at different narrative levels, and also as a character, and Crenshaw as a character, a narrator, and a character in her own story narrated by Bell as a character, all inside a book with Bell's name printed on the cover. One effect is to create the impression of a polyphonic chorus of voices rather than a single authorial voice.²³ As will become apparent, the notion of a chorus or choir is central in Bell's approach to ethics, which emphasises dialogic exchange and communality.

The revised characterisation of the extra-terrestrials as benign beings is also made apparent at the level of auditory perception. As soon as the trade has been completed,

²² For a helpful summary of Sartre's existentialist ethics on which this analogy is based see Flynn.

²³ In his studied deployment of multiple narrators and narrative levels in the »Space Traders« texts and in his other short stories, Bell can be read alongside other works of African American fiction, which Jablon, drawing on Mikhail Bakhtin, argues »do not conclude with a synthesis but remain polyphonic, unwilling to compromise the chorus of voices into a performance by one« (11).

the aliens no longer sound like Ronald Regan but now speak in a »warm and resonant« (Bell, »Redemption« 18) black voice which cannot be identified as male or female. At the sound of this voice, all those on board are instantly released of their bonds and provided with robes of »beautifully woven cloth« (19), suggesting ethnic African attire, to cover their near-nakedness. The extra-terrestrials reveal that they have studied the USA from their distant planet and are familiar with its racist history and the inhuman treatment inflicted upon African Americans. It is African Americans' »ability to transcend« and »sing through« (Bell, »Redemption« 20) such extreme adversity that the extra-terrestrials admire and value, and they believe it will provide a solution to problems on their own planet which, though technologically advanced, still has not eliminated suffering. Thus, Bell portrays the extra-terrestrials not simply as altruistic liberators but as being motivated by self-interest in bringing those onboard to whom they refer in (worryingly) transactional terms as »human treasure«, to their distant planet (20).

By extending his thesis of interest convergence beyond Earth into an alien world, Bell may be suggesting that the pursuit of group self-interest is a universal feature of sentient life. Nevertheless, in contrast to the European slave traders who transported human treasure from Africa to the New World as chattel slaves, the Space Traders are guided by ethical principles and require the consent of those on board in order to proceed with their plan. During the months-long journey to the Space Traders' home planet, the situation in America rapidly deteriorates. The wealth gained in the trade is quickly squandered; the rest of the world treats America as a pariah nation for having agreed to such an inhuman trade; and without a racial group to scapegoat, U.S. society stops functioning – the realisation of Bell's contention that African Americans and their oppression are a structural necessity for the preservation of America's existing economic and social relations. Adhering to the ethical principle of obtaining informed consent, the Space Traders offer the passengers the choice to continue the journey to their new home or to return to America to help rebuild it.

Before a vote is taken, Golightly and Crenshaw are invited to speak, respectively, in favour of returning to America or continuing to the Space Traders' home planet. The speeches of the two advocates, transmitted telepathically to all on board, allow Bell to present and critically assess contrasting historical and contemporary responses by African Americans to racism, including what Masiki calls »messianism« and »Afro-Zionism«.²⁴ Both advocates articulate the tension between home and homelessness, belonging and alienation, felt by African Americans in white supremacist America. In his address, Golightly, who speaks for messianism, warns of the potential dangers of

²⁴ Masiki summarises messianism as denoting »the idea that African Americans are providentially destined to play a sacrificial role in the perpetuation of the US« (30). Afro-Zionism is the belief that black emigration to a separate homeland is the only solution to racial terror in the USA.

living on the planet of the extra-terrestrials, »a strange world in which we can never be more than outsiders, inferior by any measure to beings who control technology beyond even the wildest imaginings of our science fiction writers« (Bell, »Redemption« 22). Golightly advocates returning to America because it is »home«, even if it has always been an »uncaring« home, where African Americans have a selfless, almost scared duty, in keeping with the example of their ancestors who survived through centuries of struggle, »to wring out of present danger a life of commitment to service to one another and our brother and sister Americans of any color« (24). In her turn, Crenshaw, a proponent of Afro-Zionism in this instance, interprets Golightly's appeal to tradition, so to speak, as a symptom of risk aversion brought about by a brutalised existence. As she views it, this brutalised existence has resulted in a willingness »to accept the devil we know rather than take on the unknown, perhaps worse danger« (Bell, »Redemption« 25). Appealing to a different tradition of African American responses to racist violence, that of the slave singers who »sang of a City called Heaven«, she urges those on board to accept the Space Traders' offer as providing the long sought-after opportunity for a new beginning in a home »free of oppression« (25).

After a debate, a poll is taken, with a 70 percent majority in favour of continuing to the Space Traders' home planet, the very same proportion as that of the American electorate who had supported the deal with the Space Traders two months earlier. However, the extra-terrestrials' technology is able to detect that the feelings of the passengers fluctuated massively depending on whether Golightly or Crenshaw was speaking, which leaves them to conclude that had Golightly instead of Crenshaw spoken last, the outcome of the vote would have been reversed. Here Bell points to both the unreliability of referenda as gauges of the so-called ›will of the people‹ and, even more radically, the extent to which feelings are socially constructed, contingent, and open to being changed.

The Space Traders, who represent enlightened and rational thinking, find the »ambivalence« of the passengers »very disturbing« and disappointing and say they will circle the galaxy while deciding what to do (26). The sequel terminates without resolution, in a galactic figuration of deferral, and with Crenshaw leading a communal rendition of the hymn »Amazing Grace«. The communal singing of the hymn connects the sequel with the original story, in which the same hymn was also sung at a critical juncture; this time, however, by having all participate, Bell portrays a mode of collective being which is able to transcend the individual without suppressing the differences between individuals. The choice of song is also a means to convey Bell's paradoxical thinking and pervasive sense of irony regarding African American experience and the struggle for racial justice. »Amazing Grace«, which is among the most recognisable of African American spirituals, was, as Bell points out, written by the white British former

slave-ship captain John Newton and its melody may have been inspired by the »sounds of sorrow and strength rising from the holds« (»Redemption« 28). The sequel's final lines are a verse from the hymn which ends »grace will lead me home« (28). Home, whether back in the USA, on an alien planet, or somewhere more metaphysical and otherworldly, remains deferred, as the story's title suggests. What counts, ultimately, is not the destination but the act of keeping faith. It is fitting that the story should terminate in a Gospel song, referencing an expressive practice which lifts words off the page, interprets them into a new medium, and imbues them with the affective power of the living voice.

Conclusion

Frequently taken as an illustration of Bell's thesis that »racism is an integral, permanent, and indestructible component of this society« (*Faces ix*) – an ethically challenging thesis that bears on how African Americans can lead lives that have purpose and worth – »Space Traders« continues to provoke contrary and passionate responses from readers. The aim of this paper was to demonstrate that the story provides something beyond a straightforward exemplification of Bell's permanence thesis when consideration is given to its evolution from a pedagogical text used in law classrooms to raise awareness about racism and stimulate debate; its status as fiction in Bell's multiple-story world; its deployment of science fiction themes, conventions and devices; and its existence as one of a dialogical set of fictional texts, which includes an epilogue and a sequel. This paper has argued that »Space Traders« – an inconclusive narrative which engages the reader in acts of interpretation, especially with regard to the afterlife of slavery – is less concerned with forecasting the future course of racism in the USA than with making racism's unfolding history manifest in the here-and-now and encouraging personal and collective political resistance. For Bell, victory is possible even in defeat, for by making the free choice to resist – »to be in that number« (*Ethical Ambition 127*) – a person is already victorious and can lead an ethical and meaningful life in the face of uncertainty and adversity. Certainly, such a proposition will dissatisfy many, especially those who stress the need for tangible and material progress in social and racial justice. Yet to rebut the proposition is also to respond to Bell's call aimed at raising consciousness and to partake in the kind of searching and critical dialogue Bell encourages with his fictional work.

Author

Simon Lee-Price is Senior Lecturer in Learning Development at Buckinghamshire New University (UK) and a Senior Fellow of the Higher Education Academy. His PhD from Cardiff University (UK) is in critical and cultural theory with a focus on the black diaspora in the UK and USA. A published author of speculative and ›dark‹ fiction and creative non-fiction, his work crosses the boundaries between academic and artistic expressive practices. His recent publications include »Our Own« (2021) in the *Westchester Review* (www.westchesterreview.com/simon-leeprice) and »Writing ›Dark Fiction‹: An Autoethnographic Reflection« (2021) in the journal *New Writing*. He is currently preparing a chapter on Henry Miller and racial masquerade for an edited collection on American writers in Paris due to appear in 2023.

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The author has no competing interests to declare.

Filmography

COSMIC SLOP. Director: Reginald Hudlin. US 1994.

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