



## Review of

**Nalo Hopkinson and Uppinder Mehan, editors, *So Long Been Dreaming: Postcolonial Science Fiction and Fantasy* (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2004), 304 pp.**

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As Nalo Hopkinson observes in her introduction to *So Long Been Dreaming*, colonization and empire are frequent motifs in science fiction. The short stories in this collection raise subversive questions that challenge oppressors, the oppressed, and the descendants of both to think about themselves and their experiences in new ways.

Part one focuses on *the body*. In “Deep End,” Nisi Shawl depicts a scenario in which the minds of criminals have been transferred into a computer on an interstellar spacecraft sent to explore a new world. The cloned bodies sent along for their minds to inhabit are not their own,

leading one character to ask what difference it would make if the color of her new cloned body's skin were different from the one with which she was born. Andrea Hairston's story "Griots of the Galaxy" also features entities who take on new bodies and move from one existence to another. In this case, however, the entities who do so are intergalactic historians, gathering fragments of lives from across history in order to preserve whatever they can from being lost. The story provides opportunity for reflection on whether anthropologists or historians, as mere observers, can "save" elements of a culture in danger of being lost, or whether it is more meaningful to be immersed and become involved, even with the cost that entails. Suzette Mayr's story "Toot Suite Matricia" is a parable of mixed marriages and the experience of being caught between cultures, feeling in one's new environs like a fish (or selkie) out of water. Larissa Lai's "Rachel" explores the character of the replicant Rachel from *Blade Runner*, with her borrowed *memories* that make it possible for her to believe she is human. What we remember about the past shapes our identity, and so what happens if we discover that our "memories" may not correspond to reality?

Part two focuses on *future earth*. "Terminal Avenue" by Eden Robinson explores a near-future experience by Native Americans. "When Scarabs Multiply" by Nnedi Okorafor-Mbachu explores patriarchy and regime change in post-nuclear holocaust Niger. Vandana Singh's "Delhi" is my personal favorite from the collection. Through the story of a person who sees and interacts with individuals from other periods in time, Singh provides a glimpse of a possible future for Delhi, while exploring human interconnectedness, fate, and free will. Tamai Kobayashi's story "Panopte's Eye" depicts a post-cataclysm earth ruined by corporations.

Part three is entitled *Allegory* and contains only two stories. "The Grassdreaming Tree" by Sheree Thomas straddles the boundary between science fiction and fantasy. Set on an alien world, its characters nevertheless seem to share earth's history of tension between people with different shades of skin color. Wayde Compton's "The Blue Road: A Fairy Tale" is more strictly allegorical, depicting displacement and segregation imposed on expatriates, among other things.

Part four is called *Encounters with the Alien* and begins with Karin Lowachee's "The Forgotten Ones," a story of children left behind in the course of an interstellar war. Greg van Eekhout's "Native Aliens" explores another sort of postcolonial experience, that of people who

live most of their lives in a place they or their ancestors are not originally *from*, but which has for many years been *home*. Celu Amberstone's "Refugees" features waves of interplanetary survivors from an earth that humanity has destroyed. A group of more recent arrivals seeks to adjust to the shamanic practices of those earlier immigrants who seek to live in harmony with this new world. The newcomers also question the benevolence of their alien "rescuers." "Trade Winds" by devorah major focuses on the challenges of cross-cultural communication. Carole McDonnell's "Lingua Franca" symbolizes the changing linguistic realities of colonial and postcolonial situations, as a Federation from earth seeks to remedy the "problem" of a particular planet's inhabitants, providing surgical implants that will allow them to communicate via verbal-aural means rather than by sign language alone. The generational rift the main character experiences is not limited to the postcolonial experience in our era, when changing technology leaves each generation feeling left further and further behind. Ven Begamudré's "Out of Sync" incorporates motifs from Indian religions as it tells a story of a world that humans share with beings of energy.

The final section of the book is called "Re-Imagining the Past." "The Living Roots" by Opal Palmer Adisa imagines people who escaped enslavement during the colonial era by moving underground and adapting to life there. Maya Khankhoje's "Journey Into the Vortex" tells a story of loves that transgress boundaries of nation, culture, clan, and even time. The final story returns to the genre of science fiction, as Tobias Buckell's "Necahual" illustrates how colonial absorption of territory is often justified as "saving" people from the tyranny of others. In this interstellar scenario, the need merely not to *survive* but live and thrive is emphasized, as is the importance of finding ways to adapt to changing realities in the process, and the question is asked whether slow social evolution or rapid radical upheaval accomplishes more lasting positive effects on a society.

Many of the stories in this volume are compelling works of science fiction or fantasy in their own right, and are not merely of interest because of their postcolonial or religious components. But the combination offers something special. As Uppinder Mehan says in the final paragraph of his concluding reflection on this volume, "Postcolonial writers have given

contemporary literature some of its most notable fiction about the realities of conqueror and conquered, yet we've rarely created stories that imagine how life might be otherwise" (p.270). *So Long Been Dreaming* represents a welcome addition to the category of postcolonial literature – not merely additional stories, but an expansion of *genre*, one in which the volume's authors express themselves effectively and often provocatively.