

Conversation Pieces
Volume 54

Boundaries, Border Crossings,
and Reinventing the Future

by
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Reinvent the Future, Change the World

I grew up Catholic in a paper mill town. In the 1950s. There were few things, as a girl, I could imagine growing up to be: a housewife or a nun. I didn't really want to grow up to be either. Then I discovered Sue Storm and Meg Murry.

They say the golden age of Science Fiction was when you were ten. When I was ten Stan Lee wrote the first issue of *Fantastic Four*.¹ Marvel Comics introduced something new to the comic world—characters who were no longer merely iconic. They were real messy human beings. They struggled between good and evil. They made mistakes and tried to recover from them. They were complex, or at least the boy characters were.

For the first year of the *Fantastic Four*, Sue Storm's only power was the ability to make herself invisible. Her other powers of the mind were added later, some of them much later. This didn't seem odd to ten-year-old, paper mill-town me. I loved her. I practiced invisibility. I dreamed that if no one caught me doing the brave or unusual, I might, might, might be able to get away with something wonderful in my life. I've never forgiven Stan Lee.

1 Stan Lee and Jack Kirby, *The Fantastic Four*, Marvel Comics 1961-1962.

It was Mrs. Black the librarian who made me read *A Wrinkle in Time*.² Apparently, she thought I needed role models. One little lady, in my whole little town, trying to fight stereotypes on her own, one child at a time.

One of the ways to suppress women's writing, according to Joanna Russ, is to declare "She wrote it, but she's an anomaly."³ This also applies to characters in books. Meg Murry was an anomaly. Her mother was an anomaly. Meg Murry's mother was an actual, working, scientist. I was used to working mothers of course, though they were never called that. My Aunt Gerry always worked, but she never had a job. She was a housewife, and she worked for "pin money."

I loved Meg because I didn't know anyone like her. I couldn't believe she was real. This is a tactic not only used to suppress women's writing, but also to delegitimize all accomplishments of marginalized groups. Any individual accomplishment is an outlier and cannot change the so-called facts of popular stereotypes. Even when I saw myself represented, I couldn't see *me*. I saw an anomaly that by definition couldn't be me.

For those of us who live in the margins, who live in liminal space for reasons of color, race, gender, poverty, disability, family violence, we learn early on to weave our way in and out of reality. Melissa Harris-Perry talks

2 Madeleine L'Engle, *A Wrinkle in Time*, Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 1963.

3 Joanna Russ, *How to Suppress Women's Writing*, University of Texas Press, 1983:

"She didn't write it. She wrote it, but she shouldn't have. She wrote it, but look what she wrote about. She wrote it, but she wrote only one of it. She wrote it, but she isn't really an artist and it isn't really art. She wrote it, but she had help. She wrote it, but she's an anomaly. She wrote it, but..."

about living in the crooked room,⁴ about the difficulty of reconciling one's experience of reality with the version society imposes. As social creatures we need the shared reality of what it is to be a human being. But, we also need recognition for who we are as unique individuals. When we cannot reconcile who we are with the stereotypes imposed upon us, it can have severe consequences on our ability to function productively in society. But, there is even more to it than this.

For me, the story of science fiction is the story of learning to live in the crooked room. I was drawn to stories of the outsider, of the loner, of the outcast. There were so many stories about that loner, though. The loner, invariably a white dude, fought The Powers That Be and won. The loner lived squarely outside of the crooked

4 Melissa Harris-Perry, *Sister Citizen*, Yale University Press, 2011, p. 29:

“When they confront race and gender stereotypes, black women are standing in a crooked room, and they have to figure out which way is up. Bombarded with warped images of their humanity, some black women tilt and bend themselves to fit the distortion. It may be surprising that some gyrate half-naked in degrading hip-hop videos that reinforce the image of black women's lewdness. It may be shocking that some black women actors seem willing to embody the historically degrading image of Mammy by accepting movie roles where they are cast as the nurturing caretakers of white women and children. It may seem inexplicable that a respected black woman educator would stamp her foot, jab her finger in a black man's face, and scream while trying to make a point on television, thereby reconfirming the notion that black women are irrationally angry. To understand why black women's public actions and political strategies sometimes seem tilted in ways that accommodate the degrading stereotypes about them, it is important to appreciate the structural constraints that influence their behavior. It can be hard to stand up straight in a crooked room.”

room. Because he was male, because he was white, we were already primed to know that he would win. Science fiction never filled me with that “sensa wunda.” There were lots of loners in imaginary space, but I read to learn how the outcast survived.

Perry was talking specifically about the internal inconsistency of being a black woman in America, about the intersection of black and female, the discrimination assigned to both categories, but also the interstitial discriminations that apply only to black women. Intersectionality is always more than the sum of its parts.

But, I recognize that particular disjunct anyway. I am drawn to the stories of other marginalized people. I too, quest for recognition. Diana Pho said about her reading of science fiction, “... here’s another truth valid in my life: when I didn’t see myself in a mirror, I smashed it and saw myself in the pieces.”⁵

I’m trying to keep my footing here. I take what I can get.

As my teens ended I veered even further from the classless, raceless, genderless protagonist. You see, I got pregnant at nineteen, at the height of the sexual revolution. We thought we knew better. We fought for birth control and abortion rights. We read *Our Bodies Ourselves*.⁶ We talked about female orgasm. We thought we could find the one true fix. When women of color asked for a more inclusive definition of reproductive rights, white women demanded that we solve the problem of *when* we become pregnant, and all the rest would fall into place. We believed a narrative about choice, choice simplified.

5 Diana Pho, “Breaking Mirrors,”
<http://www.jimchines.com/2015/03/breaking-mirrors-pho/>.

6 Boston Women’s Health Book Collective, *Our Bodies, Ourselves: A Book by and for Women*, Touchstone, 1976.

Ahh, white women and the sexual revolution. We thought we could control and celebrate and experience our own sexuality, overcoming the virtuous woman stereotype. We rebelled against her as a universal, not knowing (unwilling to recognize) that women of color, particularly black women, were never recognized as virtuous. We said we wanted sexuality without consequences, we only understood consequences imposed by misogyny. We refused to talk about sexualized racism against black women. There wasn't even a word for that until 2010 when Moya Bailey coined the word *mysogynoir*.⁷

Then, I became a mom. The white feminist narrative betrayed me, or I betrayed it, depends on who you talk to. I guess. I crossed a border.

I've been a mom as long as I've been a grownup, longer probably. You don't see a lot of moms in science fiction. The first mom *I* ever saw was Jerry in Barry B. Longyear's "Enemy Mine."⁸ (He died in childbirth, by the way. I lived.)

"We become particularly—and viciously—hungry for narrative when we are those who live in the unstable margins of the world," Claire Light writes. "It is not that you cannot have a story without conflict, but rather that without conflict, you don't *need* a story."⁹

7 Mysogynoir is a term coined by Moya Bailey to refer to the way anti-blackness and misogyny combine to malign Black women. <http://moyazb.tumblr.com/post/84048113369/more-on-the-origin-of-mysogynoir>.

8 Barry B. Longyear, "Enemy Mine," *Manifest Destiny*, Berkley Books, NY, 1980.

9 Claire Light, "Girl in Landscape, How to Fall into a Politically Useless Narrative Rut and Notions of How to Get Back Out," *Narrative Power, Encounters, Celebrations, Struggles*, ed. L. Timmel Duchamp, Aqueduct Press, 2010, p. 227.

“Enemy Mine” was told from the point of view of Willis Davidge, that loner we were talking about. This one didn’t win, though. Through his relationship with Jeriba Shigan and Jerry’s child, Davidge crossed the border from loner to outcast. I loved that story, too. I still cry when I re-read it.

But, here are a few things that stick out for me now. Jerry is an outsider through his role as the alien being in a war between humans and aliens. His alien status is pressed home when Davidge has a flashback to military training and the Drac are referred to with transphobic and ableist slurs. The use of these slurs does an odd double duty that we often see in fiction. By using these slurs, which even in the eighties “educated” people read as “bad,” we know that the Powers That Be on the human side were also “bad.” Not a stretch. This is a common sf trope, that the loner must fight the evil Powers That Be.

But, the alien being is also successfully othered, relegated to permanent outsider status through these very same slurs, because we have already agreed in the common wisdom of civilized, hierarchical societies that being trans is “icky” and that most of us would choose death over being a “retard.” The literary technique only works if at some level we either believe or have internalized these notions. We do not challenge the stereotypes as applied to the Drac as much as we challenge the stereotypes when applied to Davidge. We accept that Davidge is being treated unjustly because he is associated with marginalized groups of which he is not a member. The marginalization of the Drac is only seen as wrong when seen through the white gaze¹⁰ of Davidge’s experience.

10 The white gaze is the act of centering observation in whiteness. Whiteness is considered the normal state or the unmarked state. Whiteness does not need to be remarked on,

Internalization of these notions, these notions of who is othered and who is the loner destined to win against all odds, prompts the reader to accept stereotypes. Stereotypes, even when presented as negative, are reinforced in the reading of the tale. We believe we are rejecting damaging stereotypes (good on us) at the same time that we embrace them to give meaning to the overall arc of the story.

Jerry's othering was further emphasized when the African-American actor Louis Gossett Jr. was cast in the movie to play Jerry, following a common movie/TV trope of talking about racism by metaphor in a world where all the humans are white.

Why are African-Americans always cast to play the alien? Oh you say, not always. Yeah, yeah I hear it— Will Smith.¹¹ To paraphrase Joanna Russ, “they did it, but there can only be one of them.” African American casting in science fiction exists to make a *point*. White movie goers are able to talk about racism without talking about racism, proving that “we are not Racist.”™

But, there is another pernicious danger to the lack of representation: not only how we recognize ourselves but also how we see others. Science fictional and fantastic tropes are common these days in popular culture. The days of the lonely geek reading *F&SF* and *Analog* and *Azimov's* and comic books, and getting A's in science class and math and Latin, and being outcast by the cheerleading clique are long gone.

How can people define themselves without a narrative that matches their experience? How do we see marginalized people who have only been defined for us

but every other race is remarkable only in its relationship to whiteness.

11 Oops. That's a little dated. I mean John Boyega.

by unrelenting, popular narratives? How do we learn to interact with people othered in popular culture if not through popular narrative? When marginalized Americans appear at all in our fiction and movies, they are presented in stereotypical ways, and the narrative reinforces the notion that it is the individual behaviors of the marginalized that are responsible for the existence of the stereotype. But make no mistake: representation is about more than hurt feelings. Representation matters because ultimately lives depend on it.

White people live in a white bubble. I'm gonna tell you a funny story about the white bubble. Except it's not funny, and it's not just a story.

Let's start with mothers. I don't remember when being a mother didn't frighten me. I knew I was too young, maybe. My babies were too perfect. When I brought my oldest child home from the hospital, I cried. She was so perfect. She was just so absolutely perfect. Anything I did to or for her could only inevitably change her for the worse.

When something tragic happens to somebody's child, it touches every parent's fears for their own children. People talk about "a parent's worst nightmare." We empathize with those suffering through this nightmare. This nightmare terrorizes the community of parents. I didn't know this when my children were small, but black mothers have different nightmares than white mothers.

I had three kids, a marriage that failed, a life to put together, somehow. My children's upbringing was, shall we say, not what I wished for them. They were wild teenagers. They broke curfew, took risks. They were acting out against leftover anger. I spent their teenage years in constant fear of what would happen to them when I

didn't know where they were, what trouble they were getting into.

Spoilers. They survived. They grew into adults with their own families, their own fears, their own challenges. They made it through their teenage years. Where there's life there's hope.

My elder son acted out in the same ways his older sister had. He'd call me in the middle of the night from halfway across Madison looking for a ride home. I told myself, "At least he's a boy. At least I don't have to worry about some stranger hurting him when I don't know where he is." I told this to another mother, a black mother. "Well, you can say that," she said. "It's not true for us."

A prick in the bubble.

My grandson is the same age Trayvon Martin would be if he had not been murdered on February 26, 2012. At that time Rie was in high school, doing high school things, chasing girls, arguing with his parents, playing basketball, getting A's in courses that engaged him and barely turning up for others. He was stopped by the police regularly on his way home from school or the library. He was one of only two black kids in his class and the only Asian kid. In a town with a population of a little over two thousand, police requests to know who he was and where he was going rang hollow. They knew who he was. He was suspicious because he existed, black in a white town.

I doubt Trayvon's death would have hit me so hard if it hadn't been for Rie. I could have gone on believing that a mother's/grandmother's worst nightmare was the unexpected, unexplainable death. I didn't know about the fear of the expected death.

Most of Rie's family is white. We are late to this party. We wish this party didn't exist. This party is no fun at all.

My daughter has become the mother Mikki Kendall described: "There's a certain horrible routine you go through after you hear that a police officer has shot a Black youth. You check on your kids first. Even if the shooting wasn't in your city, there's still a moment where you need to be sure that they are okay. Then, the waiting starts: Who was the child? Do you know his/her family? ...even if it isn't your baby, it is *someone's* baby bleeding, or worse yet, already gone."¹² Another prick in the bubble.

Most white people do not interact with people of color on a daily basis. We see more portrayals of young black men as gangsters and thugs than we see of young black men in real life. We see more portrayals of young black women as single mothers and drug addicts than we do young mothers in real life. We are convinced they do not feel their motherhood the same way we do, certainly not the same way we would if we found ourselves in unfortunately similar circumstances.

When we do interact with black people in real life, we force honorary membership in the unmarked state¹³ onto them. They seem no different than white people to us (we don't see color). We insist they are anomalies. We

12 Mikki Kendall, "The Worry and the Wait for Justice: What it Feels Like to be a Black Mother Right Now," *Common Dreams*, <http://www.commondreams.org/views/2014/12/03/worry-and-wait-justice-what-it-feels-be-black-mother-right-now>, 2014.

13 "The unmarked state—Possessing demographic characteristics considered "unremarkable" by the dominant culture." Nisi Shawl and Cynthia Ward, *Nisi Shawl and Cynthia Ward on ROARS and the Unmarked State*, <http://www.booklifenow.com/2010/03/nisi-shawl-and-cynthia-ward-on-roars-and-the-unmarked-state/> These characteristics typically include: white, male, cisgendered, straight, able-bodied.

deny lived experience and agency in a single thought. To paraphrase Russ again, they lived it, but they're an anomaly. Our stereotypes remain intact. Physical segregation is a part of it. But even with proximity, black parents are not seen as a part of our community, the community of the unmarked state, the human community.

Knowing people of color has never prevented white people from making racist assumptions when confronted with the repeating tragedy of another black person shot by a white cop: he shouldn't have been there; he shouldn't have been doing whatever it was he was doing; if he wasn't doing anything bad at the time, he must have done something bad in the past; he shouldn't have been dressed the way he was—that led the police to the reasonable assumption of a or b above; he shouldn't have lived where he lived—that neighborhood is a known hostile environment.¹⁴

On August 9, 2014, Michael Brown was shot by a white cop in Ferguson, Missouri. His body was left in the street for hours. His mother was prevented from going to him.

White people imagine that if Michael had simply stepped onto the sidewalk when asked, everything would have been different. He would be alive today. We conveniently forget that cops don't patrol white neighborhoods policing jaywalkers. But if they did, we tell ourselves, we

14 Officer Darren Wilson called the area where he shot Michael Brown a "hostile environment... There's a lot of gangs that reside or associate with that area. There's a lot of violence in that area, there's a lot of gun activity, drug activity, it is just not a very well-liked community. That community doesn't like the police." Rachel Clark and Mariano Castillo, "Michael Brown Shooting: What Darren Wilson told the Ferguson Grand Jury," CNN, <http://www.cnn.com/2014/11/25/justice/ferguson-grand-jury-documents/index.html>, Nov. 2014.

would behave responsibly, the police would be reasonable, everything would be OK. We want to believe that the world is essentially fair. We keep this particular myth of fairness intact by divorcing individual actions from circumstances and by making judgments based on the consequences of being white in the white community.

So the news came out that Michael was stopped for jaywalking. He was insolent and disrespectful. Soon video footage surfaced of somebody who may or may have been him shoplifting a handful of five-dollar items from a convenience store. He shoved a man who tried to stop him leaving the store. This is evidence of his “thug” nature. Claire Light again: “There is no ‘there’ there until you build the narrative. Story doesn’t reflect reality, it *creates* it.”¹⁵

We say wait for all the facts before rushing to judgment, even though the only way to square that particular circle is to leave out most of the facts, to rearrange their order into a predetermined narrative. Once we know the timeline, we can ignore that according to Darren Wilson’s initial report, he was unaware of the incident later reframed as a “strong-armed robbery”¹⁶ at the time of the jaywalking stop.

15 Claire Light, *Ibid.*

16 “In an afternoon press conference, Ferguson, Mo. Police Chief Thomas Jackson said Wilson did not initially make a connection between the robbery and Brown, whose death spurred violent protests and unrest in the St. Louis suburb over the past week. ‘Wilson stopped Brown and a friend because they were in the middle of the street, blocking traffic,’ Jackson said. Yamiche Alcindor, Marisol Bello, and Aamer Madhani, “Chief: Officer noticed Brown carrying suspected stolen cigars,” USA Today, August 15, 2014: <http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/usanow/2014/08/15/ferguson-missouri-police-michael->

There is a loop playing in Lesley McSpadden's, Michael Brown's mother's head. I see it in her face. I am haunted by it. Where would we be if white mothers were able to put themselves in McSpadden's place? What would be different if we considered McSpadden a member of the community of mothers, if we empathized with her grief, if we shook our heads at the worst nightmare a mother can imagine? What if that look on her face resonated with all mothers?

She has the look my sister had when my nephew Nick died. Nick went to the emergency room with nausea and vomiting. He never came home. It is hard to process something that you so desperately want not to be true, something in your life that is so fundamentally wrong. My brother-in-law just shook his head. The only phrase he could utter was "Terrible. Just Terrible." Most of the sympathetic, hopefully comforting things people had to say just made him angry.

In the days that followed, we sat around my sister's dining-room table, talking about Nick, remembering Nick. Remembering Nick as a child, a teen, a young adult, the potential that was lost, the wedding my sister would never be able to go to. Good and bad, we had a shared sense of the whole of him, the him we were determined not to lose. My sister and I became unusually close. Even though we lived in the same town, we had seen very little of each other in the preceding twenty years. She said to me, "This is Nick's gift to us. That we've become close again."

It is difficult to process the unexpected death. I can't imagine the grief involved in processing the expected death, the death that seems inevitable. The death that is

brown-shooting/14098369/. Note how the title of the article adopts the new narrative.

the black mother's worst nightmare. Except I can. Another prick in the bubble.

McSpadden's son was stolen from her twice. In interviews she struggled to fight the narrative that has been woven to justify her child's death at the hands of a white cop. White America denied the good and bad of him, the lost potential, the hopes and fears of his parents. He was not a whole person, a whole son. He was rebranded thug.

This is *the* common narrative surrounding the deaths of black people in similar circumstances. Here is the story arc: The unimaginable happens. A tragic circumstance. We struggle to understand why. New facts come in. The victim is actually the villain. Order is restored. Confidence in the power of the state is restored.

Michael's mother is required to grieve in public spaces, is required to justify the existence of her son, rather than honoring him, remembering the best of him. She defends him in public by saying this is not the Michael we knew, yes he had his problems, but he was a good kid. If white people were truly colorblind, any parent of a teenager would be familiar with his problems, including the shoplifting, including the hip-hop music. (OMG Motley Crue roaring out of my daughters' bedroom in the nineties.)

Another prick in the bubble.

And then there's Tony Robinson, unarmed Tony Robinson, killed by a white police officer three doors down from my daughter's house in a transitional (gentrifying) Madison neighborhood on March 6, 2015. I didn't know Tony Robinson. But, by now I do know Tony Robinson.

If misdemeanors deserved the death penalty, if due process was irrelevant where wild teens were concerned, if young adults were routinely shot for being high and

behaving erratically on a Friday night in college towns, white mothers would be terrified.

The familiar story surrounds Tony's death. The police officer who was called—to help him, by the way—was afraid for his life after confronting him. We do know that Tony was having a bad reaction to hallucinogenic mushrooms, that he was running in and out of traffic, that he punched someone in the head, and that his friends made the first 911 call. At the time Officer Matt Kenny first confronted Tony he had been told that Tony was probably unarmed and likely intoxicated.

Kenny chased Tony into the stairwell of his home (where dashcam footage couldn't follow). Everything that happened next happened in less than half a minute. According to the available dashcam footage,¹⁷ Kenny entered the apartment alone, and within roughly eighteen seconds shots were fired, and Kenny backed out of the stairwell, back into view of the dashcam, firing a final shot. Tony can be seen sliding out feet first. Additional police officers arrived on the scene almost immediately.

In his statement Kenny says he opened fire after being punched while at the top of the stairs. He does not know how he got back to the bottom of the stairs. I find myself wondering, how in the world did he get to the top of the stairs in under ten seconds?

There are unsubstantiated reports that Kenny was told to wait for the backup that was moments away before entering the apartment; however, in his grand jury testimony Kenny explains that he heard noises that indicated someone might be in danger, that “he heard a dis-

17 “Tony Robinson Shooting: Wisconsin Officials Release Dashcam Footage,” *The Guardian*, May 13, 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2015/may/13/tony-robinson-shooting-wisconsin-dashcam-footage-released>.

turbance coming from the upstairs apartment, including noises that sounded ‘like a fist hitting something’ and a person yelling, ‘What are you going to do now, bitch?’”¹⁸ and that that is what prompted him to enter without waiting. He can be heard on the dashcam footage shouting “there is somebody up there” as additional officers arrive on the scene.

Without being mind-readers we will never know if Kenny really thought there were multiple people in the apartment and if he really thought he was entering the apartment to prevent imminent violence, or if it was something else that made him repeat the common narrative justifying officer-involved shootings.

He contends that he became “afraid for his life” before he started shooting, but how long before, really? If we simply take his statements at face value, it is apparent that adrenaline and fear had more to do with his interpretation of events than the chain of events did. There was no one else in the upstairs apartment.¹⁹

In two US Supreme Court cases, *Tennessee v. Garner*, 1985, and *Graham v. Connor*, 1989, the standards governing police use of escalation of force were revised by the Supreme Court to a more subjective measure. The current standard is the level of danger the officer surmises at the time of an encounter and the split-second assumptions he makes about the suspect.²⁰ In a society

18 Nico Savidge, “No Charges Against Officer,” *Wisconsin State Journal*, May 13, 2015, http://host.madison.com/wsj/news/local/crime_and_courts/madison-police-officer-matt-kenny-cleared-in-shooting-of-tony/article_428b0cf9-da97-5951-9936-2f699547ba3f.html.

19 Ibid.

20 Carol D. Leonigg, “Current law gives police wide latitude to use deadly force,” *Washington Post*, Aug. 28, 2014, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/current-law-gives-police->

informed by the racist idea that black people are more prone to violence and less able to feel pain, this measure is repeatedly lethal.

In the weeks prior to Tony's death, there had been a number of non-fatal shootings in Madison. Madison Police Chief Michael C. Koval attributed these to increased

[wide-latitude-to-use-deadly-force/2014/08/28/768090c4-2d64-11e4-994d-202962a9150c_story.html](https://www.wide-latitude-to-use-deadly-force/2014/08/28/768090c4-2d64-11e4-994d-202962a9150c_story.html).

“The first of the Supreme Court rulings that still govern law enforcement policies nationwide on the use of deadly force is *Tennessee v. Garner*. In the 1985 case, the court concluded that police officers could not shoot at a fleeing suspect simply to prevent their escape. They could shoot, however, if they had probable cause to believe the person was a violent felon and posed a significant threat of death or serious harm to the community.

“The more overarching decision is the 1989 *Graham v. Connor* ruling, written by Chief Justice William Rehnquist and at a time when violence against police was rising amid a crack epidemic. In that case, Charlotte diabetic Dethorne Graham had rushed into a convenience store to get orange juice to stop an oncoming insulin attack but left the juice inside and left suddenly because of the long line. He asked a friend who had driven him to the store to instead drive him to another friend's house for food.

“Charlotte city police officer M.S. Connor, suspicious at Graham's hasty exit, followed him and his friend, stopped them for questioning and didn't believe Graham's story about being diabetic. As Connor was checking by radio with the store, Graham got out of his car and passed out briefly. Backup officers arrived, told Graham to shut up and rammed his head into a patrol car while throwing him in the back of it. “Graham sustained minor injuries and argued that the officer's use of force was excessive. But the Supreme Court found that the officer's actions were justified because he reasonably believed the force he was using was necessary to prevent or detect a crime in progress.”

gang activity and assured the Madison community that the police force was being placed in a heightened state of alert. “Chief Koval says the shooting at West Towne Mall has taken this violence to a whole new level with hundreds of innocent bystanders put in harms [sic] way. ‘We are going to bring every investigative resource we have legally to make those folks accountable. It’s no longer a time to have a “pity party.” Now it’s time to make those people accountable,... While I’m all about looking at root causes and how we can be helpful, there’s a time when “my gang” is going to have to come down and come down hard in holding people accountable,’ Koval explains.”²¹

Coded language in Koval’s comments about gangs in Chicago, Beloit, and Milwaukee referencing “those people” make it clear to the community that Koval is talking about black male youth. It is inconceivable that this heightened state of alert did not translate to a heightened sense of danger when answering a call regarding a young black male suspect in a transitional west side neighborhood that has as many poor people of color as it has white students.

After the shooting Chief Koval congratulated the Madison Police Department on their response to protests and their ability to keep the demonstrations peaceful, as though failure of the police to incite the community to riot was a singular and praiseworthy achievement. Predictably, the white community called for the black community to wait until all the facts were in before rushing to judgment.

21 Gordon Severson, “Madison police say recent shootings are gang related and likely connected,” WKOW.com, March 1st and March 16th, 2015, <http://www.wkow.com/story/28233444/2015/03/01/madison-police-say-recent-shootings-are-gang-related-and-likely-connected>.

On the night Tony was killed, his aunt Lorien Carter spoke to the neighborhood crowd gathered in front of the apartment building where he was shot. She said: “Here in our little bubble of Madison, WI... I want y’all to know, that for minorities, we are [in one of] the top five worst places to live. But we are [also in one of the] three happiest cities to be in. So who is it happy for?” “They’re going to frame this so that it’s the black kid’s fault,” said Craig Spaulding, father of Jack Spaulding, one of Robinson’s closest friends.²²

One of the damning pieces of evidence that came to light to justify loss of due process and summary execution for the crime of disorderly conduct while black was the fact that Tony had a previous felony conviction for armed robbery. He’d pled guilty in a plea deal and served probation.

But the felony conviction would follow him. He believed at the time he took the mushrooms that he no longer had a future. A matter of days before he died, he told his mom, “I fucked up.” He said it over and over, “I fucked up, mom...I’ve ruined my life.”

The adults in his life tried desperately to convince him that he still had a future, that he would get through this, that they would be there for him. There was a moment in time when there was hope, when there was a way out, even if he couldn’t see it. I find myself unable to sleep at night feeling his despair. As long as there is life, there is hope. “I fucked up, mom,” he says, “I’ve ruined my life.” The needle is stuck there. Forever. Where is hope now?

22 Zoe Sullivan, “Madison police shooting offers stark reminder that city’s race issues run deep,” *The Guardian*, Mar. 8th, 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/mar/08/madison-police-shooting-tony-robinson-race>.

The white community sees the incidence of a white cop killing a black youth as anomalous, an isolated incident. Even when the white community feels the shooting is unjustified, it is a case of “one bad apple.” Systemic patterns of abuse are never at fault. The scholar M. J. Hardman talks about anomalousness as it is embedded in the English language itself: “Anomalousness provides a way to dismiss, of making non-existent. By classifying as anomalous, one creates a way of not counting... These patterns continue to work until one recognizes them, names them, and decides not to use them.”²³ The patterns are clearly evident, yet for white people to recognize and admit these patterns results in an immediately devastating effect on our world view. Basic notions of fairness are brought into question.

Human recognition, as described by Melissa Harris-Perry, also suffers a blow. The self-defensive response is to look for the anomalous characteristics, the characteristics that “prove” the pattern doesn’t exist. And the patterns we turn to, to support our prevailing world view are the patterns we’ve learned from the stories we tell ourselves.

In science fiction these are the stories where white men can rise to be heroes and young black men can only be thugs. Yet, we could have a different response to the pattern of the repeated tragedies of the deaths of black people at the hands of white police officers. We could have a coming together, an empathy in the face of tragedy, a building of community. We could feel anguish in the case of the worst thing that can happen to a mother.

23 Anita Taylor, M. J. Hardman, & Catherine Wright, *Making the Invisible Visible, Gender in Language*, iUniverse LLC, Bloomington, 2009.

Hardman further describes anomalousness as a way to “keep us from perceiving people with whom we could form community.” The question of who makes up a community and how a community is created is the central question of Octavia Butler’s Parable duology.²⁴ Though the first novel, *Parable of the Sower*, is framed as a religious quest, creating community is its central task. When the communities formed by family and neighborhood fall apart, Lauren Oya Olamina is tasked with finding out if there is even any meaning in the concept of community for this dystopic future.

Butler seems particularly prescient in these books. As a domestic violence survivor, some violent dystopias just make more sense, to me anyway, than the shared perception white people have created. I’m not reading these books for disaster-movie heroism, mind you. I’m looking for tips on how to survive the unthinkable. Reading Butler is like reading ahead in the gaming cheat book to know if I am on the right track. If I keep using this strategy, will I beat the boss? I read dystopian fiction to find out if people like me will live till the end. Mostly we don’t. But sometimes we do. Where there’s life, there’s hope.

There is a parallelism within the work as well as a parallel to real-world society. Olamina first turns her back on the religion her pastor father has given her. She does this because any kind of an ordered society has already turned its back on her. Although *Parable of the Sower* is written as a quasi-religious tract, finding community is the key to the new religion, and finding a society that actually works for its members is its goal. Olamina is forced to flee the gated community in which she lives after the murder of her father and after the walls are

24 Octavia Butler, *Parable of the Sower*, Book One of the Parable Series, Open Road Integrated Media, Jan. 1, 2000.

no longer sufficient to keep out the most marginalized members of what can barely be called society.

At first she looks for the specific family and friends she has lost. Eventually she makes common cause with two people whom she herself terms an unlikely pair. This is the beginning of the new community, united to follow Olamina and her new religion. The new community of the novel is created through circumstance and choice. Choosing whom to trust is key. What makes this especially difficult for Olamina is that she has inherited a birth defect of hyper-empathy. Her perception of other people's pain and despair literally cripple her.

Trust is a sensitive topic for me. When I left my abuser, I had to accept the fact that trust had failed me, that I was totally incapable of getting a read on people, so to speak. I know now that abusers do not wear their intent like a badge. People who insist that there are signs are unlikely to be survivors.

So, I don't trust anybody anymore, least of all myself. But this is not necessarily a bad thing. I never take it personally if someone chooses not to trust me. After all, it is likely what I would do if I were in their shoes. A recurring theme of black activists is the refusal of whites to accept the validity of their lived experience. Yet if white people were to trust the framing of people of color, we would have to make an enormous leap into belief in a society that is fundamentally unfair and dangerous to its citizens. But how are we to cope with something we can't even see? Wouldn't we all be stronger for recognizing the truth?

There is a loop playing in Michael Brown's mother's head: this can't be true—it must be true. I see it in her face. I am haunted by it. Like Olamina I can't *not* feel her pain. Her pain is dangerous. But, just as being a domestic

violence survivor gives me the ability to know that trust is a gift and not an entitlement, as a white person I can bear witness.

So, I get why representation matters, really. It's nice to find people who look like you, who face your struggles, who triumph outside of a narrow path. It is important for young people to have role models, in fiction as well as in life. Books where people who look like me, who've been through what I've been through, mean a great deal to me. But I also seek out the books by people who do not look like me, who've survived different struggles, who aren't afraid to lift the veil of white entitlement and imagine a different future. I read to see myself. I read to see a world where my family survives. I read for a future I've been unable to imagine on my own. I read for hope.