

THE WISCON CHRONICLES
VOL. 5

The WisCon Chronicles

VOLUME 5

Writing and Racial Identity

Edited by
Nisi Shawl



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The WisCon Chronicles, Volume 5
Writing and Racial Identity

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Introduction

by Nisi Shawl

Some time in January of 2011 I wrote to a friend: “I feel like I am floating in an alternate universe of silver goggles and artificial wombs and look there’s Emily Dickinson smoking a cigar.” I was deep inside the process of editing *The WisCon Chronicles, Vol. 5: Writing and Racial Identity*, surrounded by all those elements and more — a delightful place. “It will be nice when other people get to read this book,” I added.

It is.

There was never a doubt in my mind as to the theme of this fifth volume of the WisCon Chronicles. Almost as soon as Timmi Duchamp asked me to edit it, I knew. “Writing and racial identity,” I stated firmly, aloud. It seemed to me a thoroughly WisConsinese topic, one that anyone who attended this famed feminist science fiction convention would be able to address.

Imagine my surprise upon learning that I was mistaken and that many, many people I approached about contributing were hesitant to do so. Some refused me outright. Mostly (but not exclusively) it was white people who found themselves reluctant to discuss the intersection of writing and racial identity.

Maybe I oughtn’t to have felt so puzzled; worry over looking stupid and getting this stuff wrong is alive and well thanks to various internet “Fails.” (A capital-F Fail is an error-precipitated online conversation about race, gender, or some other common pretext for marginalization.) The concern over coming across as a fool is rational; plenty of us did get it wrong and looked totally stupid in one recent Fail or another. I’m glad, though, that authors of all races had enough to say on the subject that seemed intelligent enough to me to make a whole book. Because the racial identity of WisCon itself has changed. Since WisCon

23 in 1999 — when the POC-in-genre advocacy organization Carl Brandon Society was founded — WisCon attendance by POC has increased tenfold. And eleven years later WisCon 34 played a crucial part in that change, as detailed in the essay immediately following this introduction.

I think we have to talk about that. I *want* to talk about it. I have loved hearing what other people say on the subject.

I'm neither the mother nor the father of anything in this book. But because I've assisted at their births I have a deeply intimate relationship with each and every one of these texts and images. I want you to love them all, yet I know you'll have favorites. Read them and look at them, then tell me which you think is the best.

I'll offer you only one superlative: MJ Hardman's minim opus, "The Russ Categories," has got to be the hardest-won essay in this book. For years MJ has taught a course on applying the lessons of Joanna Russ's *How to Suppress Women's Writing* to the accomplishments of other suppressed groups. With colleague Anita Taylor she has been making of it an interactive online learning experience. I asked her to contribute a condensed version. Right before her deadline she had what's technically known as a "bilateral pulmonary embolic shower." Hundreds of blood clots formed in her lungs. One is enough to kill a person.

MJ apologized from her hospital bed for missing her deadline. A few weeks later, when still a "shut-in" tied to an oxygen tank, she submitted her essay. It is provocative, sweeping, humorous, magnificent. It may well be the book's heart.

If "The Russ Categories" is *Wcc5's* heart, the multiple interviews Eileen Gunn solicited, compiled, and edited form its well-articulated exoskeleton. A literary armature, the six questions answered in "Racial Identity and Writing: A Dozen Writers and Thinkers Reflect" divide the book into thematic sections and give it a coherent shape. I hope. At any rate, Eileen's respondents are enlightening in their very contradictions. Entertaining, too.

Editing this book has been a joy. My thanks to its many contributors; to Timmi, Kath, and Tom, who have made Aqueduct Press not just possible but real; to SF3, whose grant has made *The WisCon Chronicles, Vol. 5: Writing and Racial Identity* more affordable for you; to Kate Nepveu and the Con or Bust donors, who made the presence of fen of color at WisCon 34 a force to be reckoned with; and to my ancestors, who made

me. I believe this book also owes much to Exu, Afro-diasporic deity of intersectionality; and to his mother, Oshun, goddess of love, wealth, beauty, culture, and transformation, for whom the number five is sacred.

A Short History of Con or Bust

by Kate Nepveu

Con or Bust raises funds to assist people of color to attend WisCon and other science fiction and fantasy conventions committed to increasing racial diversity and understanding in fandom and the field generally. It helped nine people of color attend WisCon in 2009, and thirteen in 2010, as well as helping two publishers of a diversity-focused small press attend WorldCon in 2009. After Con or Bust's first year, the Carl Brandon Society assumed management of the fund, allowing it to become an ongoing project.

Origin

Con or Bust began as a response to RaceFail09, a months-long on-line discussion that was initially about cultural appropriation and racial stereotypes in writing and eventually involved a number of professional authors and editors in science fiction and fantasy behaving in hurtful and harmful ways. I think the most useful summary is this themed one by Ann Somerville at <http://logophilos.net/racefail.html>; links to others of varying detail can be found at <http://wistfuljane.livejournal.com/218945.html>.

I had been going to cons since 1997, and participating in online fan communities a few years before that, and — like many other people — I was deeply hurt, angered, and alienated by the behavior of prominent members of this community, some of whom I had considered friends. Though RaceFail09 strained or broke many relationships, it created

others. And in early March 2009, when some fans of color expressed the desire to attend WisCon and meet each other in person, they and others in the conversation, including myself, came up with the idea of a fundraiser to help that happen.

The goal of Con or Bust was to help fans of color attend WisCon, where they would be their own awesome selves. It wasn't a scholarship, it wasn't restricted by either fan or pro status, and there was no requirement that people be on programming or network or anything of the kind (indeed, all requests for assistance were and are confidential). We simply felt that it would be a good thing if there were more fans of color at WisCon and wanted to help that happen.

Fundraising and Assistance

Elizabeth McClellan and I ran an auction on LiveJournal through mid-April 2009. People offered a wide variety of auction items, such as a cameo appearance in a novel; custom-made jewelry or clothing and other craft items; story critiques; baked goods; and, of course, lots and lots of books. The items receiving the highest bids were a seed account at Dreamwidth (a journal service then planning its open-beta launch), and a custom-written short story by Daniel Abraham. We also had two other significant types of contributions: first, transferred memberships to WisCon, which WisCon 33 co-chairs Debbie Notkin and Jim Hudson helped me manage; and second, help with PayPal's restrictions on receiving money, including Deb Stone's donation of transaction fees, and use of her account to accept donations via credit card.

The 2009 fundraiser raised \$5,898.14 and helped nine fans attend WisCon 33. Nine people isn't a lot in an absolute sense, but it isn't nothing either, considered against WisCon's thousand-person membership cap. Also, later that year, Con or Bust helped two people of color attend WorldCon as representatives of a small press focused on diversity.

Because Con or Bust's auction started so late relative to the May weekend on which WisCon takes place, we weren't able to allocate all the donations we collected to potential attendees. We were left with a surplus of funds, which we donated to the Carl Brandon Society. (As the comment about PayPal may have suggested, I was running this fundraiser out of my personal bank account, which I was only willing to do on

a very limited basis.) The CBS then agreed manage Con or Bust's funds and apply the donation to Con or Bust's ongoing efforts. Since the CBS is a 501(c)(3) organization, this also allowed future donations to Con or Bust to be tax-deductible to the extent permitted under U.S. law.

In 2010, the auction ran for two and a half weeks in February and March. We had similar kinds of things offered, but considerably more people offering them. The items receiving the highest bids were a signed, personalized first edition hardcover of Neil Gaiman's *Anansi Boys* and a podfic recording of an epic-length (no word limit) fanfic story of the winner's choosing.

We raised \$6,183.89 and helped thirteen people attend WisCon 34. Unfortunately, we did not have the funds to help everyone who requested assistance, so we will be trying to raise more money in 2011.

WisCon 34 Gathering

In 2010, Con or Bust also ran a Characters of Color Fantasy Faceoff at the Gathering, with the final rounds at the Carl Brandon Society's party. This was a light-hearted bracket-style challenge meant to give people the opportunity to promote their favorite characters of color and make silly arguments about who was more awesome. In the end, Zoe Washburn from *Firefly* defeated Yeine from N.K. Jemisin's *The Hundred Thousand Kingdoms* to win the entire Faceoff. The full bracket results can be found at http://community.livejournal.com/con_or_bust/55591.html.

This event came about almost entirely because of people other than me — I've never actually been to WisCon, and so it was only Jackie Lee's encouragement that prompted me to look into doing something at the Gathering. Elizabeth McClellan and Mikki Kendall not only volunteered at WisCon but handled the earlier collection of character nominations, while Andy Best, Sterling Novak, and Saira Ali helped with the voting.

Feedback

As I said, I've yet to attend WisCon myself. But I've seen a number of people say that they noticed more fans of color at WisCon 33 and 34. Con or Bust can't take credit for all of that increase, but I believe it did contribute, since many of those assisted by Con or Bust said that they wouldn't have been able to attend otherwise. This increased member-

ship also supports and is supported by at-con efforts of fans of color to connect with and support each other, such as informal get-togethers and a safe space for people of color. And, on a more individual scale, a number of those assisted have told me that they had a great time and were very glad to have gone, which is Con or Bust's most basic goal.

Future Plans

Con or Bust's future plans are pretty simple: spread the word that assistance is available more widely, raise more money, and help more fans of color attend WisCon and, hopefully, other cons with a commitment to diversity. We're planning to get a logo designed so that we can sell T-shirts and such year-round, and will continue to work on making the yearly auction bigger, more diverse, and even more full of terrific items. And, on a personal note, one of these years I hope to make it to WisCon myself and see the results of so many people's hard work and good will in person.

Remarks from Con or Bust Beneficiaries

(Recipients of Con or Bust grants are anonymous.)

Recipient One: Last year I was lucky enough to be a Con or Bust beneficiary. This deeply impacted my research by allowing me to be mentored by Andrea Hairston, with whom I now email back and forth, and Nisi Shawl, whose work as an Afrocentric writer and blogger has deeply impacted my work on global citizens' movements.

Attending WisCon under the auspices of the Carl Brandon Society, Con or Bust's administrator, was also especially useful to me as a fan of color. I met many of the authors and bloggers of color I had been interacting with online for the last several years. This encounter felt more like a homecoming than anything else.

Finally, when attending WisCon I had the opportunity to hear authors like N.K. Jemisin talk about her work as an activist, Nisi Shawl reflect on authors writing as allies, and Mary Anne Mohanraj speak on motherhood, eroticism, and her own evolution as an author. I also became a juror for the CBS Parallax Award, which has been an amazing experience.



Recipient Two: I attended WisCon for the first time last year, and it was an amazing experience. I met authors whose work I love, spoke with other fans and writers of color, discussed issues that matter deeply to me, participated on my first panel, and even gave a reading of my own. I cannot begin to express how all that helped me realize there is, indeed, a place for me and for my work, or how it encouraged me to keep speaking about diversity and social justice both within the realm of speculative literature and outside it. I've written essays and been interviewed since then, not to mention producing more of my own fiction.

But I wouldn't have been able to take part in the WisCon experience without the financial support Con or Bust provided me. Because it covered my hotel and plane costs and included a stipend for food, I didn't have to worry about whether or not I could afford the trip. Instead, I could concentrate on the things that mattered: sharing my voice, taking part in the conversation, furthering my own dream of seeing Indian YA fantasy in print. For that, I'm more grateful than I can say.



Recipient Three: Getting the money to attend WisCon was an unexpected boon and made me grateful. In a way I also felt a bit guilty about receiving it since I did have a job, and then a smattering of angry stopped by for a visit. What brought anger to my door? Thinking how I have a job and live in this supposed great land, but I still needed aid to get to do something fun and couldn't do it on my own.

Overall, I'm glad I went, glad I got the funding, and hope I can return the favor in the near future so someone else can get a taste of WisCon.

My First WisCon

by Tanya C. DePass

Disclaimer—I wrote this piece about four months post WisCon 34, so if I misspeak about anything I did or said, apologies up front. Also any stories and references to WisCon 33 are via conversations with friends, and LiveJournal and other postings about the fail there as well as the good times. So again, if I've misremembered anything passed along the interwebs about the 2009 WisCon, I ask your forgiveness in piecing things together via a memory that's somewhat shot as well as year-old stories of a WisCon past that I didn't attend.

So, WisCon 34 was my first experience attending a sci-fi convention with a target audience of feminists. I really didn't know what to expect, since I'm not a big con-goer in recent years. I was nervous due to several factors. For one thing, as far as WisCon attendees I only knew the other three folks in the car that I was coming with. Also, I had no clue how big WisCon was, and I was worried about the drive there. Since I'd never actually driven out-of-state before and since there was no one else in the car that could take over I was a bundle of nerves until we got to the con hotel. There was also the specter of RaceFail09 hanging over my head and coloring my expectations of what I'd take away from the con.

I worried about being there as a person of color (POC), as well as a newbie, since these kinds of things can be intimidating the first time around, and most of all I worried/wondered what exactly I'd do since there was so much going on, with sessions I was interested in often overlapping each other. Once I was checked in, I had just enough time

to get to Tempest Bradford's Dinner for Fans of Color. It was a fun start to the evening, where I got to meet some of the authors I'd recently discovered, as well as other POC in attendance, and most importantly I had a chance to decompress before facing the con itself. That brought out some mild social anxiety, especially after walking into a crowded hotel lobby during the beginning of the dinner break. That anxiety was eased by running into a couple of folks who I knew but hadn't realized were going to be at WisCon, so that helped out with the omg-too-many-people-flee instinct that threatened to consume me before I hit the POC dinner.

Once the dinner was over, I hung about the hotel for a bit and then I hit up the LiveJournal party since there were LJ folks I knew I wanted to see. I was exhausted by the time 11:00 came and my memory is of course not serving me well as I write this, but I know Day One was short but sweet. I remember being annoyed because I'd really wanted to get to the "How Did All the Thin White People Take Over Space?" panel. That session was on bodies in sci-fi, an issue I'm really interested in due to my own roundish physique. I missed it, though. Ah, well, there's always next year, and the write-up that exists in cyber-space. Somewhere in the *melée* before calling it a night, I picked up my badge, a few goodies, and most importantly a program booklet that I could carry about with me.

Day Two was full of wow: people, sessions — what to do first?! Luckily that problem was solved when I ran into folks going to the Farmers Market, and in between tasty treats for the day and conversation with seasoned con-goers I started to feel a bit more at ease with being away from home and somewhat out of my element. I popped over to the "Politics of Steampunk" panel, but it didn't do too much for me. I left before it ended and snuck into a session I'd really had my eyes on, "Race Basics," which I'd hoped would touch on RaceFail and more importantly the expectation that POC will educate non-POC on racial issues, plus why we aren't just running around angry for no good reason. The panel was so much fun, done in a game show style that provided a much needed break from the weight of serious panels earlier in the day. I laughed so much at the questions and audience responses I needed water and a stretch afterward.

I wasn't disappointed in the panel at all, because I had such low expectations of the con and everything connected to it. The whole clus-

terfuck of RF09 had made me wary of even attending WisCon 34 due to the utter fails I'd heard of from friends that attended the previous year. I didn't think I could cope with anyone deciding that they had to try and pet the POC, or staring as if they'd never seen one outside of the Eleven O'clock News, or being hauled off in cuffs a la Cops, the TV show that's known for culprits running off into the night—usually shirtless and bewildered as to why the police might be chasing them. I had gotten my fill of RF09 by keeping up with the discussions online and by the conversations being had when I attended WorldCon in July 2009. It seemed that no matter where you went, you could not escape the touch of RF09. It didn't seem as pervasive at WisCon (unless I just missed out on some conversations or somehow tuned it out), except when I was fully present in the moment while discussing RF09 and how it affected the attendees of WisCon 34.

I noticed that the POC safe space was on the main floor, not too far from the hotel lobby, and I wondered why it would be there and not in a more accessible place for con attendees? That was explained via blog posts by con attendees and by people I'd met at WisCon 34: during WisCon 33 the POC safe space was often invaded by folks who either didn't know that set times were exclusively allocated for it, or who just didn't respect the fact that the room was set aside for breathing room for POC con attendees who may have needed a respite from the craziness that is a con, or from a panel full of fail.

Hearing and reading stories like the ones mentioned above made me worry about the whole WisCon experience, but like I've said, the fail I expected did not show itself at all, even at panels where race and othering were the topics of discussion. I think that the negative expectations due to RF09 really pushed me to pick the sessions that I attended in 2010 and in a way made my attendance more about the topic of race, how not to fail, and how to discuss such a volatile topic without it devolving into a flame war or yet more yelling on the internet about how people don't get it, why can't you just stop being so angry, etc. As a POC who often struggles with deciding when to speak up about racial issues and when to stop and consider whether things are actually racist, I found that the experience of WisCon's panels on race, othering, body autonomy, and other issues gave me a good base for discussions that will happen whether I want them to or not.

Now before you get the idea that I only went to the POC-centric panels and didn't really do much besides worry about race and expect fail to jump out of the potted plants at me, I did have a wonderful time at non-race-focused panels and parties. I was even interviewed for the dissertation project of an attendee. This attendee was doing her "overambitious dissertation," which in her own words is "a self-reflexive documentary exploring women and the identity of being a science fiction fan." She



Julia Starkey holds the game wheel for "Revenge of Not Another F*cking Race Panel" and looks down upon the proceedings, while her assistant Sumana Harihareshwara looks up.

Cecilia Tan, Shweta Thakrar, Julia Starkey, Andrea Hairston, and Amal El-Mohtar enjoy a round of "Revenge of Not Another F*cking Race Panel" as Sumana Harihareshwara wields the wheel.

Overall it was the wonderful folks in attendance who made the con for me; they are why I'm already booked for WisCon 35. During the three-and-a-half days of the con, I met folks I'd known only through electronic media. I also made the acquaintance of fine folks who were seasoned con-goers; they put me at ease in an environment that was new, a little scary and had the potential to be utterly full of fail and off-putting. Yes, the sessions are important, but if you wind up in the company of people who make you comfortable and allow you to be you, race, creed,



nationality, gender expression, sexual orientation aside, then a convention can be a wonderful experience regardless of panels, parties, and the trip there and back.

My first WisCon met and exceeded my dismal expectations as a fan of color due to the people, late night chats, great food, and wide spectrum of topics covered by the session offerings. In closing, thank you to everyone who made WisCon 34 a great experience for me, kept me from wiggling out when there were too many people, and made me realize make-up isn't something to run screaming from as if it may attack me when I'm not looking ;)

Guess Who Came to Dinner

Photographs by Alberto Yáñez
Captions by Nisi Shawl

On Friday, May 28, 2010, K. Tempest Bradford hosted a dinner for WisCon 34's POC in a private room of the Madison Concourse Hotel's restaurant. More than 50 people attended."



K. Tempest Bradford and Minal Hajratwala toast the evening's outstanding attendance.



Julia Starkey and Isabelle Schecter discuss things.



Maurice Broaddus and Moondancer Drake converse.



Smiling and talking before the food arrives. From left to right: Zola Mumford, LaShawn M. Wanak, Keyan Bowes, Maria Velazquez and Na'amen Tilahun.



Multiple simultaneous discussions featuring expressions of delight, interest, concern, and watchfulness. From left to right: Benazeer Noorani, Candra K. Gill, Maria Velazquez, Sumana Harihareshwara, Nisi Shawl, Tanya C. DePass, and Jessica Kaiser.



At some point, something appalling must have happened to someone somewhere, but Jessica is unfazed. Jessica Kaiser, Jaymee Goh, and Maurice Broaddus.



Stylin with Maria Velazquez and Julia Starkey.



N.K. Jemisin, Mikki Kendall, and Alberto Yáñez smile for Alberto's camera after their meal.



N.K. Jemisin and K. Tempest Bradford settle the bills.

Racial Identity and Writing: A Dozen Writers and Thinkers Reflect — Part One

edited by Eileen Gunn

What does race — your racial identity or that of other people — have to do with what you write?

Andrea Hairston: We have made race a meaningful part of human identity, so it is critical for me to consider that when creating a story world. I trust my intuition. I write to discover. But I am part of a story world with hidden dimensions and secret codes — I must wrestle with the hidden world that made me. It's good for my art.

Claire Light: Uh...this is a huge question and requires a complex answer. But I'll give you a short one instead, in sentence fragments. Mixed race. Apparent on my face. (Hey, that rhymes!) Makes people's heads spin. Since childhood. Lots of questions. Lots of aggression. Lots of ostracism, condescension, silencing, finger-pointing. Outsider crap. Nerd crap. Inferiority complex. Rage. Loss of language. Twist of culture. Geographical displacement. Etc. All very motivating to a writer. Also: endless source of content!

Yoon Ha Lee: I used to write in white futures and white settings, because I was emulating what I saw in the sf/f that I had grown up reading. In the past few years, I have consciously tried to write stories that break away from that, whether they're stories that specifically draw on my Korean heritage or stories that are more generally non-Western in tone. I'm pretty much prepared to do this until someone tells me that there's a glut of Korean-flavored sf/f being published in English.

Nick Mamatas: Race (and racism) is a total surround in this society. Most of my work is set in the modern day or the very near-future, and generally involves characters with no special immunity to racism; a few of my characters are bumbling leftists unfamiliar with how racist their own actions and attitudes often are. So race and identity come up about as often as traffic and the weather and text messaging — very often.

Gavin Grant: I tend to think of race throughout the process, more consciously at some points than others. I'm an immigrant — albeit a white, male, middle-class one — and am very conscious of the differences between natives and incomers. Identity is always in flux, which I find is a major fascination in my writing.

Mark Rich: Being half one thing and half another — Anglo-Swiss and Japanese — I have never quite known what it feels like to know one's racial "identity." Lately it has occurred to me that my writing and musical sides arise more from my Caucasian background, while my graphic-artistic side arises more from my Japanese background — simply on the grounds of who did what, in my respective family-branches.

All the same, I feel contrasting creative impulses that push me in different directions, and these two directions might correspond to the two backgrounds. First, I feel a strong attraction to extreme compression, stylization, and simplification. I would find it hard, though not impossible, to argue against this being Japanese. Second, I am drawn to pursue the expansive forms of fiction and historical narrative. The latter especially requires a wide grasp and a fullness of phrasing, as well as an ability to deal with a considerable amount of surface detail. The conflict between these tendencies — believe me — has caused me no end of difficulties, and has, I believe, slowed my development as a writer, even though I can be an extremely fast writer.

My first tendency sometimes pushes me off in a sound direction, only to leave me with too little on the page; so to fix that, I will at times toe the cliff-edge of overcompensation to the point of toppling over, with my typewriter plunging alongside, into the abyss of overwriting. (I have not found Japanese writers there in that abyss. I am not saying they are not there. I just have not found them.) Many, if not all, of my stories contain within them something of this conflict — perhaps as a problem, perhaps as an invisible tension. Whether it is akin to the pronounced,

self-conscious tension in Picasso's etchings, between the Goya and Rembrandt impulses, I am not quite sure. I would like to think not.

That I cannot seem to write the sort of stories, or even the sort of sentences, that most other people write seems clear to me, however.

Doselle Young: On the surface, I'd have to say that my racial identity and that of other people have very little or nothing to do with what I write. Indeed, there's a part of me that simply doesn't care, that's happy to offer quite a bit of push-back for even being presented with the question. After all, it's unlikely the same question will come up the next time someone interviews Stephen King. And therein rests one of the most difficult things that come to mind around the topic of race: the idea that neither I nor other people of color get absolute control over how my or their identity is perceived, even amongst *other* people of color.

Not that I take this personally, mind you. It's simply an observation. And if my ethnic origins have a demonstrable influence on what I write, I would say it gives me an awareness that one's racial identity is part and parcel of a larger stochastic process; important, but only one membrane of the multi-layered interface that exists somewhere between the internal and exterior world.

Ben Rosenbaum: A good and troubling question.

There are two kind of superimposed narratives here.

Race is something that makes sense only in the context of racism; it proceeds from racism. No racism, no race. We live in a historical moment—the moment since about 1560 or so—in which racism is an enormously powerful and potent force, part of the organizing order of the world, the world system. It's not a monolithic or total system, and there has been, over the last 200 years or so, an accelerating series of victories against it—even as that system has responded by becoming more complex and subtle. So here in 2011, we get Obama as Commander-in-Chief of the world's empire, but at the same time, the general questions of "O, inhabitant of earth chosen at random, do you have enough to eat? Where are you safe? What does the world seem to think you should be doing?" still cannot be usefully answered without reference to race; and despite some fragile pockets of privilege in which race is allowed to matter less, race alone provides, statistically, depressingly predictable answers to them in general.

That phenomenon, though, race—as a construct invented during, and for, the age of European colonization—is a recent historical innovation. It’s one specific way of globally ordering local xenophobias. Race is new-ish, but xenophobias are as old as large groups of primates at least. Before Europe invented race-as-we-know-it as a meta-order for xenophobias, it had a different ordering mechanism called Christendom. When Joshua slaughtered the inhabitants of Canaan, that genocide was not racial in the modern sense. Intertribal genocide only becomes racial genocide once you have a pseudoscientific system in place to extend its logic across many continents.

Well, enough theory.

For me personally, as a human being?

I am white; I grew up white, in Northern Virginia. In Virginia, race is very clear and brutally defined, and comes down to the question (and the knowledge, constant and intuitive, though never stated aloud) of who would have been the slaves and who the owners. Race herded us into groups already as kids, and in Northern Virginia those groups were pretty much—in terms of the social landscape of the lunchroom—black and maybe Hispanic on one side, and white on the other, with East and South Asians making awkward inroads. I was clearly white; I was in the same group, racially (would have sat at the same lunchtable with) Kirk and Spock and Luke and Han. Cops were polite to me, when I put on my good-boy (oh-gee-I-had-no-idea-how-fast-I-was-going) manners, and perhaps more to the point I could put them on without any uncomfortable sense that I was selling myself out, or in peril; rather, I was just being polite. Teachers expected me to be smart.

If anything that I was Jewish was, in the context of school and the playground, a way of being particularly white; it meant, after all, that teachers expected me to be even smarter, and that I was assumed to possess even less of anything compensatory in the way of rhythm, style, or “street smarts.”

I was not only white, but male and unimpeachably upper-middle class (actually, just the perfect class, for the American narrative—rich enough to have a big house, a weekly maid, and Caribbean vacations, but not so rich as to be in danger of inheriting enough wealth to make me indolent, and thus subject to pity and mockery). It was understood that I was headed for the Ivy League. It was understood that the government

and the police and the banks and the teachers and the insurance companies were there to protect and provide for me, and smooth my path, and shepherd me to whatever greatness I was destined for — that things would be handled for me, that the world's Empire would put all its efforts into making sure my world was as safe and perfect as possible, whatever happened elsewhere. I have been swimming in white privilege since I was conceived.

At the same time, it was rarely far from my thoughts that, thirty years before and an eight-hour plane ride away, my third and fourth and fifth cousins had been enslaved and shot and starved and gassed and burned for being considered, in that not at all distant place and time (my father's childhood, my grandmother's pen pals), the wrong race. Which made race seem a more fragile and random and imaginary and dangerous matter for me, perhaps, than it did for the other white kids.

And certainly there was a whole other rubric, a much older and broader historical narrative — the one rehearsed every year at Passover — in which being Jewish was a central category, and one connoting risk and danger.

That I was dark — enough so to be regularly mistaken for South Asian — also seemed irrelevant to me, an amusing coincidence that a few moment's conversation could clear up; though, on some level, it might have added to the unease. It's only as an adult that it's begun to seem perhaps more significant: since moving to Switzerland, where I'm not quite so white, and particularly since last WisCon, when I did a little informal survey and discovered to my amazement that the majority of the people of color I surveyed thought — in some cases insisted — that I wasn't white at all....

For me as a writer?

Such questions — the mapping of memory to imagination, of biography to fiction — are always difficult and fraught. But I think that dual consciousness — of being the inheritor of massive privilege and also of outsider risk — is never that far away.