FAFNIR — NORDIC JOURNAL OF SCIENCE FICTION AND FANTASY RESEARCH
JOURNAL.FINFAR.ORG

Ray Bradbury on Race and Segregation: The Case of "Way in the Middle of the Air" and "The Other Foot"

Juan David Cruz-Duarte

Abstract: This article analyses two stories by Ray Bradbury, "Way in the Middle of the Air" (1950) and "The Other Foot" (1951), examining the author's depiction of racial conflict and segregation in the US South and in an imaginary Martian town populated by African Americans. While "Way in the Middle of the Air" seems to champion a separationist approach to racial conflict, "The Other Foot" articulates the author's hope for the formation of a post-racial society, in which black and white citizens will be able to live in harmony, as equals. Reading these stories in relation to each other enriches understanding of Bradbury's take on race relationships in the United States, and of racial tensions in the American South during the Jim Crow era.

Keywords: Ray Bradbury, segregation, Jim Crow, utopia, science fiction, Mars.

Ray Bradbury published his short story "Way in the Middle of the Air" in the magazine *Other Worlds* in 1950. Later that year, this story was republished in *The Martian Chronicles*.[1] "The Other Foot", a sequel to "Way in the Middle of the Air", was published in 1951 in *The Illustrated Man*. Both stories deal with racial prejudice and segregation.[2] The fact that Bradbury deals with these topics

[1] This short story has been deleted from recent editions of *The Martian Chronicles*, including the 2001 Doubleday Science Fiction and the 2006 William Morrow/Harper Collins.
[2] Bradbury also explored the subject of racial tensions in America in his short story "The Big Black and White Game" (1945). According to Nancy Ann Watanabe, this short story, which could not be classified within the genres of fantasy or science fiction, "depicts segregation by veiling it thematically in a plot centered on the traditional American game of baseball".

 ISSN 2342-2009. *Fafnir*, vol. 7, iss. 2, 2020, pp. 18–31.

in his fiction, especially at a time when segregation was such a controversial subject in the United States, is outstanding; it is particularly relevant that in these stories Bradbury does not use the figure of the alien to deal with the issue of race. This common practice, which was prominent during the time in which Bradbury's stories were published, can be explained by the fact that, as Patricia Monk argues, as a class, the "aliens of science fiction constitute an exemplum of the other at its most extreme" (xiii).[3] Bradbury's decision to neither displace nor disguise the issue of race by using the figure of the alien is what urges Isaiah Lavender to argue that "Bradbury is one of the very few writers in sf who dared to consider the effects and consequences of race in America at a time when racism was largely sanctioned by the culture" (98). In this paper, I will demonstrate that "Way in the Middle of the Air" and "The Other Foot" depict, in different ways, an escape from racism and segregation, and imagine a solution to these problems. I will also demonstrate that the two stories (far from being shallow escapist fantasies) are deeply rooted in the historical and social context in which they were written and published. Finally, I will argue that these texts should be read in conversation with each other to truly expand an understanding of Bradbury's take on the subjects of racism and segregation in the United States.

"Way in the Middle of the Air" approaches the subject of racism and segregation by seemingly embracing the separationist impulse that inspired the founders of the Back-to-Africa (or Black Zionism) movement in the 19th century.[4] "The Other Foot", in contrast, imagines (or rather suggests) the beginning of a utopian society: not a particularly advanced one in terms of technology, but utopian in its post-racial, post-segregated nature. In that sense, "The Other Foot" is, by far, the most optimistic of these stories.

Bradbury published "Way in the Middle of the Air" and "The Other Foot" when segregation was still legal in the United States. The system of laws and practices that facilitated and enforced segregation in the US (especially in the South) is commonly known as Jim Crow.[5] Jim Crow was a racial caste system, enforced through segregationist laws and social practices, that operated in several of the Southern states of the US (but also in states located in other regions of the nation) from 1877 to the mid-1960s. Under this system, areas of activity such as public spaces, public education and private businesses were strictly segregated by race.

At the time that Bradbury published *The Martian Chronicles* and *The Illustrated Man*, black men and women in America who broke the rules associated with Jim Crow (for example, trying to eat at a restaurant for white people only, sitting at the front of the bus, or trying to enroll in white schools)

[3] In *Aliens and Others: Science Fiction, Feminism, and Post-modernism*, Jenny Wolmark arrives at a similar conclusion, arguing that, in SF texts, the "alien has been used to represent Otherness" (qtd. in DeGraw 6).

[4] The Back-to-Africa movement, also known as Black Zionism, emerged in the United States during the 19th century, influencing social movements such as the Nation of Islam. Throughout the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century, the idea of African Americans returning to Africa struggled to gain popularity among the country's African American citizens. Some attempts at "returning" to Africa, however, were made, with varying degrees of success.

[5] Although segregation was more prominent in the South, it was a national problem. Prior to 1954, segregation in public education was either optional or limited in New Mexico, Kansas, Arizona, and Wyoming, and several states in the West, Midwest, and North lacked any legislation either legitimising or prohibiting segregation in public education.

were often punished by law enforcement or terrorised by their white neighbors. Jim Crow did not end until 1964, when President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act. The next year, the Voting Rights Act was signed; this greatly benefited minorities, whose voting rights had been threatened by reactionary local politicians.[6] In "Way in the Middle of the Air" and "The Other Foot", Bradbury renders a critique of segregation and Jim Crow laws and practices. This is remarkable, considering that the stories were published during a historical moment when segregation was still enforced and defended not only by Southern segregationist politicians (such as the members of the short-lived States' Rights Democratic Party,[7] usually referred to as the "Dixiecrats"), but also by a considerable part of the South's population.

The fact that segregation was such a sensitive and controversial issue at the time that Bradbury published "Way in the Middle of the Air" and "The Other Foot" could explain why it was so unusual for mainstream science-fiction writers of the time to deal with the topic of race in a direct manner. In fact, during the 1950s, most of the works of American science fiction that dealt with issues such as race and segregation did so in an indirect or metaphorical manner. As discussed above, the figure of the alien was often used as a metaphor for the racial other. This practice is still common, and recent works of science fiction such as Neill Blomkamp's film *District 9* (2009) draw clear parallels between the figure of the alien and the "racial other".[8] This is why Lavender argues that "Way in the Middle of the Air"

> is unique in 'mainstream' sf in its scathing criticism of American racism. It's a critique of American racism which does not displace race through alien beings or replace American culture with a pretend culture. In other words, it is a direct extrapolation of the existing relation between the races in the 1950s. (98)

Approaching the issue of race in a metaphorical way has been a trademark of American SF since its earliest manifestations. Sharon DeGraw points out that, in the novels of Edgar Rice Burroughs, Mars often stands in for "Western America" while the Indians are "disguised as Martians" (5). On the other hand, Masiki states:

[6] According to Greenpeace, "in 2013, the U.S. Supreme Court overturned a key piece of the Voting Rights Act that required states with a history of discrimination to get approval of any changes to voting rules that would result in racial discrimination".

[7] The States' Rights Democratic Party was founded by dissatisfied segregationists Democrats in 1948. This party was founded after President Harry S. Truman (a Democrat himself) ordered the integration of the military in 1948. The so-called "Dixiecrats" were successful in gaining control over several Southern states. As the Democratic and Republican parties switched sides regarding racial issues, former "Dixiecrats" like Strom Thurmond (who ran as the States' Rights Democratic Party presidential candidate in 1948) left the Democratic Party to join the Republicans.

[8] John G. Russell writes, "Often presented as a subtext of and for the allegorical exploration of alterity/alienation, race and racialist thinking infuse science fiction in both its literary and cinematic manifestations" (256).

> Since the advent of the genre, Euro-American science fiction writers have typically dealt with the history of US racism by either excluding people of African descent from their narratives, imagining a color-blind future in which racial tension among humans does not exist, using robots and extraterrestrials as symbols for people of African descent, or imagining a world in which all non-Europeans are eliminated through genocide. (30)

A clear example of this metaphorical way of approaching issues of race in 1950s American SF is the comic book *Judgment Day* (1953), by writer Al Feldstein and artist Joe Orlando. In *Judgment Day*, Tarlton, a human astronaut representing the Galactic Republic, visits a planet called Cybrinia. The purpose of his trip is to decide whether Cybrinia should be admitted to the Galactic Republic. This planet is populated by two "races" of robots: blue and orange. Even though all robots are equally designed and operate in exactly the same way, the astronaut soon learns that this society is segregated, with orange robots enjoying more rights and privileges than their blue counterparts. Based on this fact, Tarlton ultimately decides to deny Cybrinia a place in the Galactic Republic. When asked by his guide – an orange robot – if there is hope for Cybrinia to become part of the Republic in the future, the astronaut answers: "Of course there's hope for you, my friend. For a while, on Earth, it looked like there was no hope! But when mankind on Earth learned to live together, real progress then began. The Universe was suddenly ours" (7). Tarlton tells his guide that when the robots in Cybrinia learn to live together, the universe will be theirs too. Back in his ship, the astronaut removes his helmet, and the reader finally sees that he is a black man. This story is, of course, a clear metaphor for segregation in the Jim Crow era.

Judgment Day was published by EC Comics, a company whose founder, Max Gaines, continually fought the censorship of the Comics Code Authority. This comic dealt with issues such as prejudice and segregation at a moment in which these topics were particularly controversial in the US. Although the authors of this comic decided to deal with the subject of segregation through (as Lavender would put it) a "pretend culture" of alien robots, EC Comics did suffer some backlash after publishing *Judgment Day*. Max Gaines had difficulty republishing *Judgment Day* in 1956. Judge Charles Murphy, who was the Comics Code Administrator at the time, wanted EC to change the astronaut from a black man to a white man. Gaines had to threaten Murphy with suing him in order to publish an unmodified version of the story. Clearly, even those authors that talked about race in an indirect or metaphorical way had a hard time publishing and distributing their work during this complex historical period.

Even though exploring topics such as race and segregation in a metaphorical way took courage and determination on the part of authors such as Feldstein and Orlando, this practice has also had its own limitations and shortcomings. DeGraw points out:

> On one level, an extraterrestrial Other is a welcome replacement for terrestrial othering focused on ethnicity, race, nationality, or gender … the existence of an alien Other can foreground the unity of the human race. Yet, such a fictional transformation also suppresses the importance of race to human society. The real prejudice and oppression experienced by many groups is eclipsed, and any explicit discussion of race is effectively forestalled. (16)

The fact that Bradbury doesn't shy away from directly addressing the subjects of race and segregation in the South is notable, precisely because, by doing so, the author does not hide or disguise the "real prejudice and oppression" suffered by African Americans.

The Case of "Way in the Middle of the Air"

In "Way in the Middle of the Air", a group of African American men and women living in a Southern town in the USA are preparing to board a rocket that will take them to Mars, where they intend to begin a new life. While the soon-to-be astronauts walk in front of a hardware store, Samuel Teece, the owner, insults them repeatedly. It becomes evident that Teece does not want to let these people go. First, he tries to stop a man called Belter, arguing that the man owes him money. The African Americans marching alongside Belter quickly collect the necessary money to pay his debt and give it to the angry and frustrated Teece. Soon after, Teece tries to stop a young man called Silly, his employee. Teece reminds him of the contract that he has signed (although Silly denies having done so), hoping that this will force the young man to stay and work in the store. But Teece's grandfather feels sorry for Silly, and he steps in for the young man, stating that he will take his place in Teece's shop. When Teece seems reluctant to accept this new deal, several white men in the store intervene. Intimidated, Teece eventually lets the young man go. When Silly is leaving, he asks his former boss what will he do at night. Silly's words suggest that some of Teece's customary nighttime activities include terrorising, and perhaps even lynching, local black people with the help of his gang of fellow white supremacists (a clear reference to the KKK). An enraged Teece and his grandfather (who says that he would "like a drive") take their vehicle and chase the group, but they are unable to catch up with them. After having an accident, Teece and his grandfather walk back to town. The men in the hardware store see the rockets take off. The proud and foolish Teece, who refuses to witness this unusual spectacle, finds a sense of comfort in the fact that Silly called him "mister" until the end.

According to Wayne Johnson, considering the political and social changes that were taking place in 1950, Jim Crow segregation would have been very unlikely to last for more than five decades ("Way in the Middle of the Air" takes place in 2003). In 1954, the Supreme Court outlawed segregated public schools at the state level. Ten years later, the Civil Rights Act banned all state and local laws that enforced segregation. Nevertheless, it is clear that when writing "Way in the Middle of the Air", Bradbury was aware of the progress made by the Civil Rights Movement in its fight for racial equality. In fact, one of the white characters in the story asks why African Americans want to leave the planet at a time when things seem to be getting better for them: "I can't

figure why they left now. With things lookin' up … every day they got more rights …. Here's the poll tax gone, and more and more states passin' anti-lynchin' bills, and all kinds of equal rights …. They make almost as good money as a white man, but there they go." Bradbury seems to be telling the reader that these advances and achievements are insufficient; they might be a good start, but they are certainly not enough. The African American people in this story are leaving for Mars because living in the conditions of the segregated US South is unfair, dangerous, humiliating, and undesirable. Knowing that progress is being made in the fight for racial equality, while understanding that this progress is still insufficient for the African American community, is one of the most progressive aspects of the story.

Lavender argues that this story "relates to otherhood, because it raises awareness of the intolerance of racism" (100). This intolerance will be mostly exemplified by the character of Teece, a white supremacist. According to Lavender, "Way in the Middle of the Air" intends to provide a solution to the color line, which proves the author's desire and political commitment to eliminate racism. In Lavender's own words:

> Providing an escape from the problem of the color line, Bradbury seems to indicate that whites and blacks cannot coexist with a cultural hierarchy established through physical differences and the complete domination of others. The story is meant to be an ironic solution to the color line. I think this shows Bradbury's desire and political commitment to eliminate racism by promoting effective social justice, even if it is only imaginary. (100)

In this story, Teece is a white Southern segregationist who discriminates against, and even terrorises, the black men and women of his town, while economically profiting from their labor. Teece's interaction with Silly makes it clear that the white man does indeed employ black men, and profits from their work. The hypocrisy of the social and economic system of the segregated South becomes clear in this interaction. Teece would not sit at the same table with Belter or Silly; he might even enjoy terrorising them and their families at night, but he is more than willing to interact with these black men when he can get something from them: the cheap labor that they might perform for his personal benefit.

In his blog entry "Black People on Mars: Race and Ray Bradbury" (2012), author Phenderson Djèlí Clark highlights some of the shortcomings of Bradbury's short story. These include the racist description of Silly and the use of the term "pickaninnies" in the story. However, Clark's main critique of "Way in the Middle of the Air" is the fact that the story is told from the perspective of the white Southerners, which does not allow for the black characters to express their reasons for leaving the planet. Masiki describes "Way in the Middle of the Air" as "an afrofuturist exodus narrative" that "explores how African American mass emigration to Mars psychologically impacts white America" (31). This impact on the white characters is a major focus of the story. But even though the story is told from the point of view of the white characters (and focuses on how the migration affects them as a community and as individuals), this does not negate the agency of the African American characters in the story (they are, after all, leaving the planet).

Clark makes a good point about the lack of a strong African American voice in the story; nevertheless, as Clark himself suggests, perhaps Bradbury "wanted to convey the perspective of Southern whites if only to highlight the absurdity of their racism". The absurdity mentioned by Clark is the contradictory reaction of white Southern segregationists when they witness the African American exodus that is about to take place. As Clark puts it, "the very whites who uphold segregation, at the same time are angered by the blacks leaving". Teece embodies this absurdity in a radical way. He needs black men because he exploits them; he needs the cheap labor that only they provide. He also needs them because he needs someone to terrorise, to humiliate and insult, to feel superior to. In a way, Teece's rage is, at least to him, justified, since, as Masiki argues, "Bradbury frames African Americans and their culture as national property, as capital whose potential loss is a threat to both the economic integrity of the state and the dialectical nature of white identity" (32). For Teece, African Americans represent cheap labor, resources, and economic wellbeing. But, even if he ignores it, they are also essential for upholding his own idea of whiteness; that is, they are a central part of Teece's understanding of his own self, his own value, his individual, social, and racial superiority.

Delving into the logic of white supremacy, Clark asks, "What is the worth of whiteness if it has no one against which to claim superiority?" That is why, at the end of "Way in the Middle of the Air", white characters seem to be perplexed and paralysed. After all, they are, as Clark would put it, "left to grapple with this new existence, as they face the gaping emptiness – both physical and psychological – left in the wake of the black diaspora". But does this all mean that "Way in the Middle of the Air", in its critique of segregation and racism, embraces the separationist logic of both white supremacists and followers of the Back-to-Africa movement? If Bradbury had never published "The Other Foot", the answer to this question would be yes. But when reading "Way in the Middle of the Air" in relationship to its sequel, it becomes evident that Bradbury's take on the subjects of race and segregation is certainly more nuanced than that.

At first glance, in "Way in the Middle of the Air" Bradbury seems to suggest that a pacifist, integrationist approach to racial conflict in the United States might be insufficient. On the other hand, the author seems to believe that, in the context of the urgent struggle for racial equality, the timid help of sympathetic and peaceful white "allies" is always insufficient, and that relevant social change can only be achieved by the efforts of the African American community. This is why Teece's grandfather cannot save Silly and Belter on his own. That is why the entire African American community is instrumental in helping Belter escape. In this story, as in the real story of the Civil Rights Movement, African Americans never needed a white savior as much as they needed each other. But if Bradbury really advocated for a separation of the races as a means of solving all the social and political conflicts associated to racism, he would not only be falling in with the logic of both white segregationists and black supporters of "Black Zionism", he would also be opposing the views of the majority of the African American people at the time. As Eric J. Sundquist argues, even though "some African Americans have wished for territorial sovereignty abroad or at home, the vast majority have desired something simpler" (100). As Sundquits argues,

> with the exception of certain strains of Afrocentrism or periodic calls, by both blacks and whites, for black colonization in Africa or elsewhere, the Promised Land envisioned by African Americans has typically been an amalgam of emancipation, equal rights, political representation, and economic justice. "If the Afro-American does not find his salvation in the United States," said Harold Cruse, "he will find it nowhere." If blacks are to achieve the Promised Land, that is to say, they will have to do so in the Egypt of America. (101)

But even though it is true that the majority of African American activists have wished and advocated for that "amalgam of emancipation, equal rights, political representation, and economic justice", it is also true that, as Trent Masiki argues, "African Americans have, from the nineteenth century to the present, theorized and practiced emigration as a response to US racism and racial terror" (25). This was particularly true during the Great Migration.[9] In fact, Masiki believes that "Way in the Middle of the Air" "is Bradbury's meditation on the relationship between the Great Migration and Pan-African internationalism in the postwar era" (31). If the exodus to Mars is a reflection of the Great Migration, the possible collaboration between African Americans and Africans in building their rockets could be interpreted, as Masiki explains, as a reflection of the author's anxieties regarding the interactions between global communism and African American activism. In Masiki's words, Bradbury's short story "confirms white fears of African American communism. The red planet Mars stands for the very real threat of African Americans aligning themselves with the red star of the Soviet Union in the postwar era" (37). What if African Americans found this Egypt, this "promised land", neither in America nor in Africa, nor even on Earth, but on Mars? What if they found social justice and peace? Not through communism or capitalism, but through a system of their own? And what would happen if white people tried to enter this promised land, after it had been taken by African Americans? How would they react to this unwanted intrusion? Does Bradbury's fiction really advocate for separation of the races as a means for addressing racism and violence? These questions are all addressed in "The Other Foot", Bradbury's sequel to "Way in the Middle of the Air".

The Case of "The Other Foot"

Critics have often read *The Martian Chronicles*, *The Illustrated Man*, and *Fahrenheit 451* (1953) in relation to the historical context of McCarthyism and the global tensions that defined the Cold War. Christopher Bundrick states that *The Martian Chronicles* is characterised by the "nearly constant threat of nuclear holocaust" (17). But the influence of the Civil Rights Movement in the works of Ray Bradbury is a subject that has not been studied in depth. It is evident that this series of social and political struggles and achievements influenced several of Bradbury's works, even though only a few critics have focused on this aspect of his fiction. Ylagan's essay "Why Do The Heavens Beckon Us? Revisiting Constructions of Home and Identity in Ray Bradbury's

[9] Between 1916 and 1970, around six million African Americans relocated from the rural South to urban centers in America's Northeast, Midwest, and West in what has become known as the Great Migration.

The Martian Chronicles", which develops a postcolonial reading of *The Martian Chronicles* and studies the idea of home in the book, does not mention "Way in the Middle of the Air" and makes no reference to the racial tensions articulated in Bradbury's text. This suggests the need to further read and analyse the stories studied in this paper to gain a better understanding of how the Civil Rights Movement both informed and inspired Bradbury's work.

According to Reid,

> While critics have noted that the book [*The Illustrated Man*] can be analyzed in the historical context of McCarthyism and the Cold War, a review of what was happening in the Civil Rights movement of this time can provide another kind of historical context that is not always considered in relation to science fiction because of the presumption of "whiteness" being the norm. (48–49)

"The Other Foot" might be one of the most compelling stories in *The Illustrated Man*. While "Way in the Middle of the Air" seems to advocate for the separation of the races as a way of putting an end to racial conflict, "The Other Foot" ends on a more optimistic note, suggesting the possibility of the rise of a post-racial society, in which blacks and whites can live in harmony and, more importantly, as equals.

In "The Other Foot" a community of African Americans living in a small Martian town prepare to receive a rocket that is coming from Earth. The people from this community have not had any contact with Earth in 20 years. Willie Johnson, a man whose parents had been killed by white supremacists in the segregated fictional town of Greenwater, Alabama, goes around town preparing for the landing of the rocket. As he assumes that the ship's crew will be white, Johnson convinces many of his friends to prepare the town for receiving the white astronauts by segregating urban spaces that had not been segregated before. He even carries a weapon and a piece of rope, suggesting that he is considering the idea of lynching the rocket's crew. Hattie Johnson, Willie's wife, opposes his extreme ideas and plays an important role in the story, acting as a clever mediator in the exchange between the crowd and the spaceship's pilot. When the rocket finally lands an old white man comes out of the ship; he is received by the puzzled and hostile crowd led by Johnson. The white man is – or pretends to be – oblivious to the fact that his life is in danger; he gives a brief speech in which he informs the citizens of the small Martian town of the fact that, after they left Earth, World War III started in the planet; this war led to the destruction of all of the planet's cities. The refugee asks his audience to accept him and his fellow survivors, and offers to serve them, as they once served white people back on Earth. He concludes his brief speech with a recognition of historical guilt and pleading for mercy.

The astronaut carries pictures of the destroyed Earth. When Johnson realises that all the places where his parents suffered segregation and violence have disappeared, he tells the astronaut that he and his people will not have to work for the town's black citizens. After saying this, he finally drops the rope. The locals dismantle all the segregationist signs that they had erected in preparation for the arrival of white people. Hattie expresses her joy, as she sees this moment as "a new start for everyone," and Johnson says that the white man "has no home, just like we didn't have one for so long. Now everything's even. We can start all over again, on the same level" (312). When asked by his children

if he had seen the white man, Johnson answers: "Yes sir .... Seems like for the first time today I really seen the white man – I really seen him clear" (313). These words highlight the fact that Johnson has recognised the white man as a fellow human being, and perhaps has even seen something of himself in the desperate refugee.

In the story, Hattie's fear that the white astronaut will be lynched is not unjustified. Bradbury's story is called "The Other Foot", precisely, because it is a story that asks what would happen if the "boot" of racial inequality in the 1950s United States were suddenly on "the other foot". In other words, what would happen if the ones with power to lynch, segregate, and exploit were the African Americans, instead of the white Americans. If this were the case, Bradbury seems to ask, would African Americans – who at the time were haunted by past and present lynching, performed by, among others, members of the Ku Klux Klan – exploit and terrorise the white minority? Would they lynch those whites who caused social unrest while fighting for their rights? If the boot was "on the other foot", would the African American community treat whites in the same unjust way in which they had been treated for so long? Naturally, this dystopian scenario would not be the end of racism and segregation, only its reversal.

Characters such as Hattie Johnson, Mr. Brown, and the mayor of the Martian town seem to be willing to welcome the white man. Lavender writes, "Speaking through Hattie, Bradbury reveals his compassion for all of humanity" (102). Hattie's empathy and compassion are so great that she is able to forgive her former oppressors. In contrast, Johnson cannot forgive the men who lynched his father and shot his mother, just as he cannot forgive the exploitation of his people and the segregation that he had experienced. He would prefer not to have to interact with white people at all; this becomes evident when he asks his wife: "What right they got coming up here so late?" (301). But because a white man is coming to town whether he likes it or not, Johnson does not miss the chance to highlight the fact that the "shoe is on the other foot now", and since that is indeed the case, he tells Hattie: "We'll see who gets laws passed against him, who gets lynched, who rides the back of streetcars, who gets segregated in shows. We'll just wait and see" (301). Johnson sees this as a chance for historical, social, and individual revenge.

But Johnson is taken by surprise when the white refugee admits historical guilt in the name of his people and offers to work for the black population in exchange for a place in their society. The brief speech of the white refugee, and Johnson's realisation that all the places and people that he associated with his people's – and in particular to his family's – history of discrimination and victimisation have disappeared in the war, dissuade him from carrying out his initially hostile intentions, and ultimately change his attitude towards the old man and the other white refugees who will eventually follow him to Mars. There is "nothing of it left to hate .... Nothing but some alien people in a rocket, people who might shine his shoes and ride in the back of trolleys or sit far up in midnight theaters" (312). Johnson's hatred has lost its target; the earthly things and institutions that he hated are no more. Vengeance is no longer an option. The past has been, in a certain way, "abolished". He can finally begin a personal process of forgiveness and healing. Thus his answer to the refugee's offer of working the land, cleaning their houses, and shinning their shoes, is simply: "You won't have to do that" (312). It is relevant to mention that

Johnson can only forgive the white race when this astronaut, in the name of all his fellows, recognises the role played by his people in the historical atrocities performed against black people in the past, and shows a sincere will to serve them.

At the end of the story, Johnson tells his children that he has seen the white man for the first time. What Johnson means is that he has been able to "see" the white man as an equal; he has finally been able to see him as human being, and not only as a brutal oppressor. Ylagan writes, "A postcolonial reading of The Martian Chronicles might posit, for example, that instead of being mere interplanetary colonizers, Earthlings are victims of a diaspora that is clearly physical, geographical, and even emotional" (38). This statement could apply equally to both "Way in the Middle of the Air" and "The Other Foot". Seeing the white man in this position of complete vulnerability (as a fellow refugee, as part of the greater human diaspora) allows Johnson to see him as an equal. Johnson knows that the white man has "no home, just like we didn't have one for so long" (38). The idea of looking for a new home, and the idea of finding and protecting that home, is central to both "Way in the Middle of the Air" and "The Other Foot". This is not strange, because, as Ylagan argues, since "its earliest days, science fiction has always been a vehicle where notions of home and homecoming were portrayed and problematized" (30). In "The Other Foot", it is precisely the condition of "homelessness" suffered by the surviving whites, that state of total vulnerability, that allows Johnson to experience pity and forgive the historical sins of white people. After whites become exiles and refugees, Johnson states, "Now everything's even." And because everything is even, he says, "We can start all over again, on the same level" (30). This statement suggest that a new age of racial equality, social justice, and true peace is on the horizon. Utopia is coming.

This ending might seem naïve, and yet, considering the state of racial tensions in America in the early 1950s, Bradbury's story was surely shocking at the time of its publication. Reid writes, "While the positive ending of the story may be considered overly idealistic for some readers, Bradbury's creation of a future Mars settled by African Americans is an image of 'blackness,' of an Africanist presence in the future, that is striking for the time in which he wrote the story" (50). More importantly, by articulating a possible end to segregation and racial conflict, Bradbury's story is radical and optimistic.

Clark points out that "The Other Foot" is also at fault in some aspects of its depiction of the racial struggle in America. He criticises the use of the "angry black man" stereotype, personified by the character of Willie Johnson. As Clark points out, the fact that "the one person who had a counter-opinion" was constructed as such a stereotype is, to say the least, problematic. Clark also criticises the story's naïve happy ending, and imagines an alternate ending in which the African American settlers living on Mars decide to send the white astronaut "home empty-handed" – an ending in which they decide that "they could forgive but never forget". Clark states that this alternative ending "would have been something quite daring – quite Bradbury in fact – forcing readers to think perhaps how those on the receiving end of hatred may harden themselves not out of equal hate, but a sense of self-preservation". As Clark points out, the "oppressed get to be angry too". Nevertheless, Clark praises "The Other Foot", suggesting that if "Bradbury did not spend too much time on black voices in this first story ["Way in the Middle of the Air"], the

sequel 'The Other Foot' placed primacy on black agency" – although I would argue that both stories focus on black agency. Nevertheless, it is true that "The Other Foot" is told from the point of view of its black characters, which was not the case in "Way in the Middle of the Air." Telling the story from the point of view of the African American interplanetary settlers was an unusual and daring move on Bradbury's part. Clark expresses how surprised he was when he first read Bradbury's story, as his normal experience of reading SF as a young person of color often made him look for blackness between the lines. However, when reading "The Other Foot" Clark realised that "there was no need to 'create blackness' – these characters were black. They were African-Americans, who had amazingly colonized Mars!" Again, back in the early 1950s, the fact that a successful white science-fiction author would tell a story from the point of view of African American characters was not only unusual or thought-provoking; it was radical.

"The Other Foot" does not depict a utopia, but its plot certainly suggests the beginnings of one: an ideal world where the racial tensions and injustices that Bradbury witnessed throughout his life will come to an end, black people will forgive their former oppressors, and a new era of harmony and equality will begin for the entire human race. Reading Bradbury's "Way in The Middle of the Air" and "The Other Foot" in relation to each other, and learning about the historical context in which the author published these stories, allow a better understanding of his take on the history of racism and segregation in the United States. In the creation of a fictional society, in which the violence exercised against black people in the Jim Crow South is neither perpetuated nor redirected towards the whites, Bradbury expresses hope for a better future. The end of "The Other Foot" suggests that a new social contract will come into being. In this utopian world to come, black people will be free from white oppression, and white people will be free, if not from their historical guilt, then at least from their former role of colonial oppressor.

Conclusions

While "Way in the Middle of the Air" is a story about black men and women escaping the segregation, exploitation, and violence of the early 1950s Jim Crow South, "The Other Foot" articulates Bradbury's hope for social harmony between the races, and true forgiveness for the historical wrongdoings that white people had committed against black people for centuries. Even though the dystopian trope of global nuclear war serves as the background for Bradbury's story, in these stories the author uses the science-fictional tropes of nuclear war and interplanetary travel to build the foundations for a post-racial utopia, an ideal society of which the reader catches only a glimpse at the end of the "The Other Foot". These stories have been neglected by many literary critics whose work deals with Bradbury's fiction; studying them now, 70 years after they were written, would allow a better understanding of the influence that the Civil Rights Movement had on Bradbury's work, and of racism and segregation in recent American history. These stories are as relevant now as they were when they were first published, seven decades ago.

Biography: Juan David Cruz-Duarte was born in Bogotá, Colombia. In 2018 he earned a doctorate in Comparative Literature from the University of South Carolina. He has conducted extensive research in the field of Latin American SF from the 19th, 20th, and 21st centuries. His academic work has appeared in *Variaciones Borges* and *Divergencias*. His poetry and fiction have appeared in *Máquina Combinatoria, Five:2: One, Burningword, Jasper, Blue Collar Review, the Dead Mule School of Southern Literature*, and *Escarabeo*, among others. He is the author of the collection of short stories *Dream a little dream of me: cuentos siniestros* (2011), the novel *La noche del fin del mundo* (2012), and the poetry collection *Léase después de mi muerte (Poemas 2005–2017)*. He currently lives in Bogotá.

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