

## **The black man's burden**

Micah Yongo

It sounds obvious, but it's worth saying: the world was a very different place back in 1903, pre a couple of World Wars and all their geopolitical ramifications, before meaningful broadcast media, household telephones, petrol-driven cars, CCTV, pop music, space travel, personal computers. And let's not get started on the internet, smartphones and the cornucopia of communication technologies they've since spawned.

Imagine, if you will, a world in which producing something as commonplace as an iPhone from one's pocket would be akin to sorcery. Where access to international travel required months-long transit times and thousand-tonne seaborne vessels.

That was the world circa 1903, a place as alien and far removed from our twenty-first-century post-postmodernism as land is from ocean fauna; subject to laws and customs wholly incomprehensible to the millennial mind, which is why it's strange to think there'd be much from that time that would resonate with today's reader in any meaningful way.

And yet it was back then, in 1903, whilst writing his seminal collection of essays, *The Souls of Black Folk*, that the African American sociologist and essayist, W. E. B. Du Bois, first coined the phrase 'double consciousness'.

Du Bois, a black man born to a Franco-Haitian father and African American mother in Massachusetts – that early nineteenth-century hotbed of civil rights law-making – was a man accustomed to wrestling with multiple layers of identity, and the ways such things can be misperceived by the world.

Du Bois once recalled how, in early adulthood, following a jaunt to mainland Europe as a student, he found himself ‘on the outside of the American world, looking in,’ before going on to remark how his fellow students, acquaintances and teachers – almost all of whom were white – had viewed the scene with him, managing not to regard him as ‘a curiosity, or something sub-human,’ but rather, ‘a man of the somewhat privileged student rank, with whom they were glad to meet and talk over the world.’

Upon his return to the United States, encountering – in apparent contrast to his old-world experiences – the pernicious ‘separate but equal’ Jim Crow laws and rhetoric that pervaded his homeland, one can imagine how the disparity between Du Bois’s experience of his own personhood as a student, and the somewhat crude, colour-defined lens through which he found himself being viewed by his countrymen in the land of his birth, may have opened his mind to that sense of identity-fracture he would later write so eloquently about – ‘double consciousness’; the black man’s burden, as it were: a common and insoluble dilemma in which he finds himself confronted by the yawning chasm between the person he knows himself to be and the one he can feel himself being viewed as by the world around him.

I can still remember my own first experiences of this sensation as a teenager, the feeling of having a false identity foisted upon me by my environment, a self that was not my own – personhood versus perception,

truth versus lie – and the hollow taste of indignity and alienation I felt as I sought to reconcile the one with the other. In fact, this same jarring yet visceral sense of dissonance is something I'd encounter frequently and in myriad ways for the next decade or more as I passed from adolescence to adulthood. It was there in nightclubs, bars, churches, or even whilst merely walking down the street – as everyone, from substance abusers to law enforcement officials, assumed I must be a drug dealer, a thief, or some other sort of malcontent, all because I apparently 'fit the profile' of some delinquent caricature they could not help but imagine me to be.

As time passed, I wondered at the origins of this caricature, and why it seemed to lodge so readily in so many minds. Where did it come from? How did it get there? And, most importantly, how might its influence eventually be undone?

Questions, I would later discover, that were being asked by my adolescent mind in echo of Du Bois's own ruminations nearly a century before; and questions, interestingly enough, that seem to have come to the fore in recent years, especially in literature, which, in a lot of ways, makes perfect sense.

After all, stories matter. They're a part of who we are, how we understand ourselves and the world. In fact, in her book, *The Human Condition*, philosopher Nina Rosenstand refers to humanity as 'the storytelling animal', choosing narrative – both our capacity for it and our orientation toward it – as the defining characteristic of our species, the primary means through which we iterate our values, define our priorities, and determine the aspirations we are to have and pursue. Whilst the salmon and the pigeon have deep instinctual homing impulses, we have stories, our chief 'tool', as

Ursula K. Le Guin once called it, 'for knowing who we are and what we want.'

And so, our tales are our compass – a truth long established, and leveraged, at varying points through history, toward aims both noble and malevolent. The dehumanising depictions of Jewish characters in the comic strip propaganda of Nazi Germany, preceding the concentration camps that Jewish citizens of that country would eventually be forced into. The stark and deliberately derogatory depictions of black Americans in D.W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* back in 1915, precipitating the re-emergence of the Ku Klux Klan in the southern states of the US.

Since the beginning of recorded time, narrative has been an instrument with which we have both expressed *and* shaped our cultural tenets and norms. Stories, by their very nature, have always been both personal and political, a means to both entertain *and* inculcate.

And so, with both genre and literary fiction in English having a history of painting the world in somewhat monochromatic shades – the writings of H. P. Lovecraft and Joseph Conrad spring readily to mind – rendering characters of colour little more than two dimensional props, or mindless fodder, to be toyed with, ignored or destroyed, it makes sense for discussions on the importance of diversity and representation in literature to have finally gained prominence.

In 2019, a survey by the Centre for Literacy in Primary Education found that only 10% of children's books published in the UK featured characters from minority ethnic backgrounds, up from only 4% in 2017 (33.5% of children in the UK primary school population are from a minority ethnic background).

Back in 2009, Nigerian author, Chimamanda Ngozie Adichie, addressed a global audience with her TED talk discussing the dangers of what she termed 'the single story', explaining how the experiences and stories of those from minority backgrounds are narrowed to stereotype and caricature when there is a lack of representation – or indeed the presence of misrepresentation in the tales perpetuated by mainstream western culture.

Although the advocacy work of Ellen Oh (of *We Need Diverse Books*), and others like her, has since helped to move the conversation about representation in literature forward – not to mention the more recent successes of publishing and pop culture phenomena such as the *Black Panther* movie and Tomi Adeyemi's *Children of Blood and Bone* book series – the still slow rate of progress has begun to foster a frustration among advocates of diversity and inclusion that some feel has tipped toward a kind of intolerance bordering on censorship.

Contrary as this may seem, this is I think a sentiment worth pondering. Have we, in our efforts to advocate inclusion, begun to exclude? What if, in our fervour for equality and tolerance, we ourselves have become intolerant?

'Each of our truths must have a martyr'. So wrote Susan Sontag back in 1963, somewhat bemusedly lamenting what she saw as her era's habit of conflating the animus of the opinionated with the validity of their opinion. Back then, the issue of note was, as she saw it, a tendency to value intellectual ardour – or even passion – over objective truth: rhyme over reason, feelings over facts. And so, when I first stumbled upon Lionel Shriver's now infamous speech on 'Fiction and Identity Politics' at the 2016 Brisbane Writers Festival, I was both conflicted and intrigued.

Here was Lionel Shriver – journalist and celebrated novelist – expressing her contempt for what she termed the growing and exclusionary ‘fad’ of denouncing cultural appropriation in literature.

‘[A]ny tradition,’ Shriver declared, ‘any experience, any costume, any way of doing and saying things, that is associated with a minority or disadvantaged group is ring-fenced: look-but-don’t-touch. Those who embrace a vast range of ‘identities’ – ethnicities, nationalities, races, sexual and gender categories, classes of economic under-privilege and disability – are now encouraged to be possessive of their experience and to regard other peoples’ attempts to participate in their lives and traditions, either actively or imaginatively, as a form of theft.’

Now, it’s true Shriver neglected to acknowledge the colonial remnants – and the subsequent iniquitous power imbalances – that pervade our modern western societies, and that have at least partially shaped the experiences, opportunities and rights (or lack thereof) of minorities and immigrants for the last century or more; imbalances that were crystalised markedly in the tragic killing of George Floyd at the hands of police officers in 2020.

Racism *is* real. And *is*, as Adichie suggested, informed by the motifs and representations of race in our media – of which storytelling, and more specifically, literature, forms a significant part. How minorities are depicted in books, movies, comics, newspapers and elsewhere *does* matter. An authentic rendering of someone’s culture doesn’t just enhance how immersive the world in which a story is being told can be, it can, and often does, contribute incrementally to the shaping of the possibilities, expectations and experiences of those who belong to that culture or others like it in the real world.

Against this backdrop, it is perhaps not quite enough to simply suggest, as Shriver did, that 'the name of the game is not whether your novel honours reality; it's all about what you can get away with.'

The truth is, in choosing to write about what we have come to refer to as 'the other', perhaps there *is* a responsibility of sorts, a duty incumbent upon the author who has decided to reach beyond the horizon of the familiar, to seek to tell that story in a way that is authentic – representative of the cultures being rendered on the page.

To deny this is to deny the power of story itself. Storytelling is, as essayist and author Robert McKee once said, 'the most powerful way to put ideas into the world today,' and so, yes, a means of exploration and discovery, but a means through which our ideas of the world and its people are shaped and defined too.

Be that as it may, Shriver does put her finger on what is, to my mind, the more interesting and important question. A question – as cited by Shriver herself – asked by a San Francisco based reviewer of Chris Cleave's 2009 novel, *Little Bee*, in which the author – a British, white male – writes from the point of view of a 14-year-old Nigerian girl. Upon reflecting on the contents of that novel, the reviewer asked, 'When a white male author writes as a young Nigerian girl, is it an act of empathy, or identity theft?'

Which *is* indeed the question, and the issue upon which Shriver's argument hinges, and perhaps the pivot that determines how tolerant, or otherwise, our efforts toward promoting representation in literature should be. Because what we're actually asking is, who should be *allowed* to tell these kinds of stories? And what kind of criteria ought to govern our answer?

It's precisely this sort of question I remember asking myself many years ago whilst reading Richard K. Morgan's compelling, Arthur C. Clarke award-winning novel, the aptly named *Black Man*.

A pulp-noirish rendering of a future Earth wrapped in the fun, evergreen tropes of a hardboiled detective tale – mystery, action, plot twists, not to mention the obligatory monosyllabic and pathos-ridden anti-hero – it's all there. But the thing that elevates the novel beyond the common motifs of its genre, is the nuance and deftness with which Morgan enabled the protagonist to both inhabit and convey that ineffable sensation W. E. B. Du Bois first began writing about all those many decades ago, back in 1903 – the black man's burden: 'double consciousness'.

In fact, upon learning, following my first reading of the novel, that the author wasn't in fact – like the title of his book – a black man, I was pleasantly surprised – gratified even. Here was a white, middle-class, middle-aged male from Norfolk, expressing on the page one of the most difficult to articulate aspects of the black experience (for want of a better phrase) in so cogent and visceral a way that it felt... authentic; recognisable, *real*... even to me... a black man.

Morgan had taken on the burden of immersing himself in the imagined experience of another thoroughly enough to integrate an exploration of that experience into the subtext of his novel, and in a genuinely compelling and creative way. Reading a novel like that, to me, was a triumph, and an example of what great literature is all about.

Because stories, the *best* stories, are a portal into worlds and experiences beyond our own, as well as evidence that another – whether it be the author or other readers – has also made that journey, thereby allowing us to say,



even if only to ourselves, 'me too'. The greatest stories are mechanisms of empathy as much as escape.

And so, to imagine that we are unwittingly heading toward a world in which a novel like *Black Man* shouldn't exist, merely because the author's skin doesn't match that of his protagonist, seems, as Shriver suggests, an undermining of what the whole enterprise of storytelling is meant to be about. If we are no longer allowing authors to imagine worlds beyond their own, how can we expect readers, or anyone else for that matter, to do so?

Perhaps this more militant form of 'representation' we have grown increasingly fond of – one in which limits are set on where our imaginations are allowed to roam – is symptomatic of the 'cancel culture' that's become so much a part of our public discourse, or lack thereof.

We no longer seem to know how to keep the baby and throw out the bath water; or eat the proverbial meat and spit out the bones. If white authors have written stories about minorities that have been dehumanising (which they undoubtedly have), do we simply determine white authors should no longer be *allowed* to write stories about minorities?

Perhaps the failure of any storyteller to write minority experiences well is *not* something to be attributed to the colour of their skin, but rather their *skill* as a storyteller – their ability to do the work of their vocation, which is, as Lionel Shriver put it, and as Richard K. Morgan so powerfully demonstrated, 'to try on other people's hats,' and, 'step into their shoes.' When an author does this well, we, the reader, know it. And when they do not do it well we, more often than not, are wise enough to know it.

Yes, there are some who will adopt that trite, touristy, throwaway sensibility in how they render experiences and cultures that are not their own, just so they can spin their latest hack work – be it a book, film, or boxset – but in a world replete with diverse and talented creatives able to write those representations well, why fear the hacks? Why not simply allow whatever they produce to be damned by its audience, why not trust the ‘marketplace of ideas’ to simply invalidate the dross?

When Shriver says that ‘people with different backgrounds rubbing against each other and exchanging ideas and practices is self-evidently one of the most productive, fascinating aspects of modern urban life’, she’s right.

To cancel the opportunity – through literature – to do that, in the name of averting ‘cultural appropriation,’ is both retrograde and destructive; akin to claiming we ought not have planes because sometimes they crash.

Any author – regardless of their class, colour, or creed – who desires to write about experiences that are wholly different from their own should be both championed and challenged to do so. Championed, that they may try; and challenged, that in knowing the weight and power of storytelling – and the quality of the genre in which they operate – they may try wholeheartedly to do it well.

Because, in so doing, we come to appreciate the sentiments of Harper Lee’s famed race and culture-crossing classic, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, in which she wrote, ‘*You never really understand a person until you climb inside of his skin and walk around in it.*’ To my mind, we’re living in a world that could do with more (not less) of this type of thinking. Surely this is the fundamental enterprise all stories *and* storytellers must be allowed to pursue: the pursuit of empathy.

## **Micah Yongo**

Micah Yongo is the author of two ancient Africa-inspired epic fantasy novels. His debut, *Lost Gods*, was shortlisted for Starburst Magazine's inaugural Brave New Words award, as well as a British Fantasy Award.

Shaped by the West African folklore of his childhood, Yongo introduces readers to fresh mythic worlds on the way to examining ideas on religion, culture and belonging.

A recording of this talk can be found at **[writersmosaic.org.uk](http://writersmosaic.org.uk)**

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