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Rudolph The Red Nosed Squirrel or Miracle on 82nd Street: Fiction/Quotation/Exposition

by Marleen S. Barr

When I [Slate staff writer Aisha Harris] was a kid, I knew two different Santa Clauses. The first had a fat belly, rosy cheeks, a long white beard, and skin as pink as bubble gum....

Then there was the Santa in my family's household, in the form of ornaments, cards, and holiday figurines. A near-carbon copy of the first one—big belly, rosy cheeks, long white beard: check, check, check. But his skin was as dark as mine.

Seeing two different Santas was bewildering....

I remember feeling slightly ashamed that our black Santa wasn't the 'real thing.' Because when you're a kid and you're inundated with the imagery of a pale seasonal visitor—and you notice that even some black families decorate their houses with white Santas—you're likely to accept the consensus view, despite your parents' noble intentions....

Two decades later, America is less and less white, but a melanin-deficient Santa remains the default in commercials, mall casting calls, and movies. Isn't it time that our image of Santa better serve all the children he delights each Christmas?

—Aisha Harris, "[Santa Claus Should Not Be a White Man Anymore](#)," *Slate*, December 10, 2013

I [Samuel R. Delany] simply couldn't tell you how Triton, as a detailed political system, functions. But its functioning can be thought about. Its functioning can be interrogated by interrogating—and by manipulating—the text. (Eric Rabkin has pointed out that a fundamental difference between SF and literature is that SF is always inviting the reader to manipulate the text: 'Suppose it was different? Suppose it didn't happen that way but this? What if.' Whereas literature—especially Great Literature—all but demands to be left inviolate. Well, I want readers to play with my text in that way.)...[W]hat basically sets SF apart from utopian thinking is a fundamental fictive approach....

By and large today, in SF, you start with the texture of life around some character. Nor is that texture necessarily conceived of as 'the good life.' Rather, you say, what would be an interesting life texture....You look at the specific texture of the character's everyday world—not the greater political structure his or her bit of life is enmeshed in. Then, in the course of the fictive

interrogation of the material that makes up the rest of the book or story, you move—fundamentally—up and out...towards the political.

What larger structures, you begin asking as you move outward, might produce such a life texture? But the wise SF writer doesn't try to answer those rigorously. Rather, she or he decides: What ballpark would those structures lie in?

—Samuel R. Delany in Robert Philmus, "On *Triton* and Other Matters: An Interview with Samuel R. Delany," *Science Fiction Studies*, (November 1990), 295-324.

Professor Sondra Lear, a feminist science fiction scholar, was inside New York's City Hall attending a symposium on how the genre impacts black children. She was excited to participate in an event Chirlane McCray, the first creative writer to serve as the City's First Lady, organized. A tumult ensued when Sondra reached the midpoint of presenting "The Laugh of Anansi: Why Science Fiction Is Pertinent to Black Children's Literature Pedagogy," a chapter she contributed to Isiah Lavender's *Black and Brown Planets: The Politics of Race In Science Fiction*. Sondra joined the throng looking out at City Hall Park. She saw a spaceship hover and land. The hatch opened. A female figure emerged. "Oy," said Special Advisor to the Mayor for Communications Rebecca Kirsznier Katz. Sondra immediately recognized that the situation could potentially range beyond "oy." McCray deployed Sondra to handle the matter.

"Sondra, this is a job for a science fiction scholar—especially a feminist one," she said. Someone has to speak to the female alien. Would you do it?"

"Of course, I'm more than happy to serve my city. I welcome the opportunity finally to turn my literary theory expertise into praxis."

A security guard burst into the conference room and shouted, "The alien says that her name is Bron Helstrom. How can a woman be named Bron—even if she is from another planet?"

"What? Bron Helstrom? Bron Helstrom is the protagonist of Samuel R. Delany's *Trouble on Triton: An Ambiguous Heterotopia*. Sure, Philip Jose Farmer enabled Kurt Vonnegut's Kilgore Trout to escape from Vonnegut's texts. But Trout was harmless. Delany said that "Bron is a despicable man" (Philmus). *Triton* describes a war between Triton, a moon of Neptune, and Earth. Helstrom could mean "trouble on" New York City. Delany's text relates to other science fiction novels about rebellious moons: Robert Heinlein's *The Moon Is a Harsh Mistress* and Ursula Le Guin's *The Dispossessed*, for example. Don't we have enough trouble in New York? Do we have to deal with rebellious moons too?"

"I can handle the trouble. I can call in post 9/11 militarized police replete with tanks appropriate for Iraq. But whadaya mean 'he?' The alien is a she. And she's named Bron yet. How can this be?" asked the security guard.

"I have devoted my entire career to science fiction. But my experience coping with a science fiction protagonist leaving the text and appearing in reality boils down to the last five minutes. Since the City could be in imminent danger, I must expediently turn to theory to answer your question. My colleague Wendy Gay Pearson explains Helstrom's ability to be both a woman and a man according to Derrida's concept of destinerrance."

"Derri who? Destinwhatdaya call it wha?" stammered the guard.

"Pearson, in 'Born to Be Bron: Destiny and Destinerrance in Samuel R. Delany's *Trouble On Triton*,' published in 2009 in *Science Fiction Studies* volume thirty-six number three and appearing on pages 461 to 477, states that "[d]eploying Derrida's concept of destinerrance (the notion of arriving at the wrong place, or reaching the right place only by going wrong)...Delany's complex investigation of questions of gender, sexuality, and race in *Triton* exposes the extent to which such ideologies depend on irrational self-justification and outright duplicity. Bron is caught in the tensions among destiny, destination, and destinerrance....Whether male or...female, Bron's only possible destination is nowhere at all" (Pearson 477).

The guard, unfazed by an extraterrestrial, fainted from the shock of first contact with theory.

"Professor Lear, please, enough already with the theory," said Communications Special Advisor Katz."

"Yes, I agree," said McCray. "Sondra, please take pragmatic action."

"Okay. This situation is egregious to the extent that I should speak with Delany in person."

An hour later, due to traffic, Sondra landed, via mayoral limousine, in front of Delany's apartment on West 82nd Street. She ran out of the car, entered the building, and knocked on Delany's door.

"Chip, it's me, Sondra. Bron Helstrom has landed in City Hall Park. Is all hell going to break loose?"

When Delany opened the door, Sondra saw things which were more unexpected than the fact that his science fiction protagonist had entered New York reality.

"Don't worry, Sondra. Even though Bron is despicable, people can see themselves in her/him. Well, a few people—both men and women, incidentally—have come up to me and confided: '*Bron Helstrom—c'est moi*' (Philmus). If an extraterrestrial is going to land in City Hall Park, it is good to encounter a relatable one."

"I feel reassured. But Chip, why are you and Dennis decorating a Christmas tree in July?"

Before Delany could answer, a reindeer emerged from his kitchen.

"And why is a reindeer in your apartment?"

"Oh, don't mind her. She's just Russ the Reindeer, the only one I kept since when it changed. Back in the day, Dennis and I traveled via full reindeer contingent. I used to say 'On Asimov, on McCaffrey, on Bradbury, now dash away dash away dash away all.' But, to adhere to the twenty-first century situation, we needed to take global warming into account and downsize to become more fuel efficient. We had to use smaller animals who require less food. And, besides, reindeer are not a part of New York culture. Keeping nine reindeer in my apartment has even gotten beyond me. So now Dennis and I travel via squirrel power."

A cute grey squirrel with inquisitive eyes and a big bushy tail entered the living room. She looked like a normal squirrel—with one glaring facial exception.

"Sondra, meet Rudolph the Red Nosed Squirrel, the helmswoman of my trusty sleigh pulling team. I owe something to squirrels. 'I have this white ancestor who had a black wife and a white wife; the wives lived in separate houses. He had no social life because everyone shunned him. I don't know what he did. Perhaps he would go out and shoot a squirrel in the morning and have it for breakfast'" (Delany "Transgressive Sexual Practice," *The New School for Social Research*, October 9, 2014).

Rudolph, horrified, responded to the anecdote by covering her eyes with her little paws and exclaiming "O.M.G."

"Here, offer Rudolph this nut to calm her down."

"Chip this *is* nuts. It's, to say the least, meshuganeh."

"Not at all. 'I can't think of anything that shouldn't be questioned' (Delany "Transgressive"). You need to change your ideas about the holiday season, put them in a different ballpark vis-à-vis race and gender. Santa Claus is black. Santa Claus is a black gay man. Sondra, I am Santa Claus. I have been living among mortals for seventy-two years in plain public genius writer sight. People are too obtuse and too tied to their normative expectations of reality to see the truth. Dennis and I have a second winter home. Our fireplace acts as a portal shortcut to that North Pole home. You can borrow Dennis's parka, hat, gloves, and boots. Even though all of this attire is bright red, adopt a red-is-the-new-black approach and make do. Take my hand. Let's jump through the portal."

"I am beginning to understand this scenario in terms of *Triton*, which exposes gender, sexuality, and race as ideologies dependent on duplication and self-justification. A heterotopia is another place, a place of difference. Foucault uses the term to designate spaces outside mundane fixed social and institutional spaces. The fact that you are Santa Claus questions positioning the North Pole as a fixed space of white heterosexism. But wait. Hold your squirrels. I can't go yet. People at City Hall are confronting Helstrom. Chirlane McCray put me in charge. I have a responsibility. I can't just go jumping through a portal."

"Don't worry. I'll leave a note for Dennis asking him to go down there and sprinkle our usual suspended animation material on the crowd's heads to cause a temporal freeze. When they thaw out, they will be oblivious to the interrupted time. I know how to re-animate them."

"You're my friend. I trust you. You once said 'Sondra, I love you' in public. You left out the part about love's relation to power. Perhaps this is because the 'more we try to understand love, the more we forget about power. As we analyze power, we tend to forget love. In the larger scheme, they are both neutral. You have to think about them both'" (Delany "Transgressive").

"For once eschewing theory, at the time I merely thought that oy a gay man loves me—this is no husband hunt help. You are my fellow Science Fiction Research Association Pilgrim Award for lifetime achievement in Science Fiction Studies winner; you can't be Darth Vader or Lex Luther. Let's go."

You're making the right decision. "Transgression means there is a line and you have to cross to the other side. You have to seize power, cross it. And if you are brave enough to desire it maybe the line will cross" (Delany "Transgressive").

Sondra held her breath and jumped.

She landed on a grey garbage sodden snow pile located in front of a large building. A silver sign positioned above the front door read "Schomburg Center For Research In Black Culture, North Pole Branch."

"I don't think that I'm in the typical North Pole anymore," Sondra said. "I'm used to difference. I've been to the University of Kansas to work with James Gunn. What New York Jew goes to Kansas? Chip, by me the Schomburg Center belongs in Harlem, not the North Pole."

"But Sondra surely you can see that the functioning of Santa Claus can be thought about by interrogating and manipulating. What if Santa Claus is, in fact, different? Be fictive. Be open to playing with your conception of Santa Claus. A black male Santa Claus accompanied by his white male partner is an interesting life texture. First, look at this fictive interrogation of the material. Then, we can move this future interrogation on to the political, the larger structures which necessitate this particular life texture."

"What you said about manipulation sounds like Eric Rabkin's notion of the difference between SF and literature. Eric is another Pilgrim—not to mention my life-long friend. If you and Eric advocate textual interrogating by interrogating and manipulating, well, I just have to get on board. Enough already with dreaming of a white Christmas just like the ones I used to know in Forest Hills, Queens, where my Jewish parents told me that Santa Claus came down the chimney and I responded by questioning and interrogating—i.e. I disbelieved the whole chimney thing and insisted that we lack said chimney and have a fire escape. Tell me about your brave new black North Pole world."

"Forest Hills? 'The world changes. I hear that things are getting a little kinky in Queens'" (Delany "Transgressive"). Your close encounter first contact with the North Pole Schomburg Center should mitigate against your feeling like a stranger in a strange land. My North Pole is very much like Harlem. Bill Clinton has an office branch here. Mayor Dinkins routinely accompanies him when he visits. In place of the usual elves, to assist me, I resurrected black people who wished to play munchkins in *The Wizard of Oz*. Munchkin Land was an all-white neighborhood.

My munchkins live in Brownstones; they love their accommodations, which would cost millions of dollars in New York. Why not take advantage of cheap North Pole land to provide the best? You might be happy to know that—in addition to wannabe munchkins who are no longer with us—deceased science fiction writers, scholars, and editors do not go heaven; they go to my North Pole. Hugo Gernsback, Judith Merrill, and Douglas Adams, for example, find it heavenly to hang out in my chocolate chip confection factory. These SF professionals are ecstatic that a fundamental fictive approach sets SF apart from utopian thinking. Because food manufactured here lacks calories, the SF community members inhabit a utopia which affords them the opportunity to spend eternity eating cake and candy sans consequence.

"In a more political vein, gay marriage is of course legal in this jurisdiction. Lacking a Mrs. Claus counterpart, I appointed Dennis as my Co-Claus. I would not think of being at the North Pole without him. 'I love to suck dick. I love kissing guys. I like to put my tongue way down their throats' (Delany "Transgressive"). On Christmas Eve, Dennis joins me front and center in the sleigh. I hope that this year the new downsized transportational squirrel protocol will work. Calorie free food aside, it could be difficult for the squirrels to pull Dennis and me—and all the stuff for the world's children. But I can practice what I preach. I can interrogate and manipulate. I do not have to limit myself to nine squirrels to replace the nine reindeer. Rudolf the Red Nosed Squirrel can lead a multitudinous squirrel herd, a plethora of pulling squirrels. New York squirrels are very intrepid. They will be able to move me and Dennis and the whole packed sleigh up and out from the North Pole—up and out, up and away—toward the political."

Russ the Reindeer snorted in agreement. Her ears pricked up as two newcomers entered the room. Sondra saw a squirrel wearing flying ace headgear and a moose.

"Sondra, I would like you to meet my friends, Rocky and Bullwinkle," said Russ. "Don't be surprised. Their presence is merely another way to play with the Santa Claus myth text, to fracture the fairy tale, to imagine that the North Pole is different. Besides, North Pole climate suits Bullwinkle. And we need Rocky to help teach his fellow squirrels how to speak English. Sleigh navigation is not easy. The squirrels have to be able to follow Dennis and Chip's navigational commands such as following a particular star second to the right and straight on 'til morning. In addition, Boris and Natasha are always on call when we want to move fundamentally toward the political."

"Fine. I'm game (no offense) to new textual openness. I'm beginning to view my North Pole sojourn as a great research opportunity. How can I pass up a chance to interview Mary Shelley? And I always wanted to meet Christine Brooke-Rose and Marjorie Hope Nicolson. I could live here forever. I will, after all, eventually spend eternity at your North Pole. At least I will be in good company. I don't mind talking ad infinitum with Calvino and Vonnegut. Tell me more Chip."

"Dennis and I distribute gifts which are free of racial and gender stereotypes. No guns. No dolls. No more white hegemonic Christmas. All children receive a science fiction novel. Sure, *Dhalgren* and *The Dispossessed* are above their heads. But they can't get enough of *The Earthsea Trilogy* and *A Wrinkle In Time*."

"I completely understand. When I was a child, I loved *The Wonderful Flight To The Mushroom Planet* to the extent that it influenced my decision to become a science fiction scholar."

"I deck the halls with boughs of robots. And this year a giant robot will appear in Rockefeller Center to replace the tree. I never agreed with killing beautiful trees and degrading them with lights and multicolored balls. Why despoil nature?"

"I absolutely concur. I no longer have cognitive estrangement from your North Pole. I came, I saw the *what if*, I conquered my original misgivings. But Chip, I am not yet ready to stay forever. I want to go home to New York. Do I have the right of return?"

"Of course."

"Is it okay if we don't repeat the chimney portal jumping thing. I ate chocolate chip cookies to the extent that I might get stuck. Is there something else I can do to get back?"

"Of course again. Just suppose it was different. No need rigorously to answer questions about what larger structures lie in what ballpark. Remember that you borrowed Dennis's red boots? Well, they're special. Tap them together. Then think that there's no place like New York home. Use these chocolate chips. Take them to City Hall Park and sprinkle them on people's heads to stop the temporal freeze."

Sondra tapped and thought. As she dematerialized, she heard Delany say, "Bye for now. I'm doing a reading on Thursday at the New School with bell hooks (Delany "Transgressive"). Maybe I'll see you there."

She landed in a very real new ballpark, the former Shea Stadium which is now called Citi Field. Being near her childhood Forest Hills home made Sondra feel at ease. Due to the temporal freeze, time was on her side. So, before returning to City Hall to tie up loose ends with McCray and the frozen crowd, she went to the Schomburg Center to do research on Octavia E. Butler.

Research concluded, she entered the subway, got off at Brooklyn Bridge/City Hall, walked to City Hall Park, and sprinkled the chocolate chips on the frozen group. After immediately becoming reanimated, they were unaware of Sondra's absence. To make sure that the crowd would remain oblivious to the time freeze, she went into science fiction theory discourse mode.

"The metatexts of transfiction operate not just on the level of verbal matrix and fictive use of the generic conventions....The open-ended, irresolved structuring of such metafiction, especially *Dhalgen* and *Triton*, displace the mimetic function by a dominant aesthetic one that is largely self-reflexive in form. A prime example is *Triton* itself in which the main narrative, with its ambiguous broken-off ending and highly uncertain resolution of plot, is followed by two appendices" (Teresa L. Ebert, "The Convergence of Postmodern Innovative Fiction and Science Fiction: An Encounter with Samuel R. Delany's Technotopia," *Poetics Today*, [Summer 1980,] 91-104).

Seeing the security guard clasp his chest in the throes of a mimetic heart attack, Sondra elected to cease, desist, and turn to her city's First Lady.

"Ms. McCray, we can take advantage of Bron's presence. Bron can beam down some Triton denizens. We can ask them how best to reconfigure New York as a utopia.

"Wonderful idea. I can use a fiction to institute change in my capacity as New York's first writerly First Lady."

McCray spent hours consulting with Bron and the Triton denizens. She decided to dedicate herself to using what she learned to make New York more utopian.

During the next holiday season, Sondra walked to Rockefeller Center and admired the giant robot. Delany gave her extra science fiction novels to distribute to her students—as well as the recipe for calorie free chocolate chip cookies.

On Christmas Eve, Sondra went to the roof of her co-op apartment building to glimpse Chip and Dennis streaking across the sky while sitting in their sleigh pulled by the squirrel herd plethora. As soon as she saw Rudolph the Red Nosed Squirrel, she frantically waved her arms.

"Hi up there. Looks like all the squirrels are going good," Sondra yelled at the top of her lungs.

The sleigh stopped in midair above Sondra's head. Chip dropped a package down from his vehicle without squashing Sondra. It contained enough gift-wrapped copies of *Triton* for all of Sondra's neighbors.

"I hope that everyone in your apartment building enjoys *Triton*. By the way, I put Bron safely back in the text. Not to worry. Ho ho ho, 'I want my friends to have a good life' (Delany "Transgressive"). Merry holiday to all and to all a good night," shouted Delany.

"Chip, one last thing before you take off and circumnavigate the planet. Is it okay if I write a story which reveals that you are Santa Claus?"

"Sure. Not a problem."

Rudolph blinked her electric red nose to express her approval.