Hidden Stars: A Conversation on Black Indie Speculative Fiction

Jalondra A. Davis and LaRose Davis

Hidden Stars: Black Indie Speculative Fiction is a roundtable discussion with independent Black writers, creators, publishers, and organizers. This roundtable continues conversations within the 2021 SFRA conference regarding the need for more critical attention to the nontraditional publishing of BIPOC authors, with a focus on Black indie publishing in science fiction, speculative fiction, comics, fantasy, and horror. The conversation addresses themes and subgenres, institution building, and the relationship between the indie scene and mainstream.

The idea for this roundtable had its genesis at the 2021 SFRA Conference. Over the course of the conference, which included papers on Baldwin, Butler, and Okorafor, we realized that so many of the authors being studied were the same ones who have received critical attention in the genre for many years. In her keynote address, Joy Sanchez-Taylor illuminated one reason for the frequent repetition of the same coterie of black science fiction authors; namely the continued existence of roadblocks to traditional publication for Black authors in the genre. Even in overcoming the obstacles to publication, traditionally published black authors still face challenges with visibility in the spaces where speculative fiction is disseminated and discussed, including at fan conventions and academic conferences. As a result, the pool of available texts by Black authors might seem rather shallow.

Black speculative writing has not diminished as a result of these obstacles. Rather, a vibrant and innovative community of independent authors and presses exists that addresses the gap and meets the need of audiences (both Black and Non-black) that demand more representative speculative fiction canons. As an indie author who has been writing in the genre for over a decade, LaRose Davis (pen name L.M. Davis) asserted understandings of Black speculative production that rely solely on the work coming out of larger traditional publishers are incomplete, both in their definition of the scope of the offerings and their perceptions of how black speculative literature is innovating the genre. In order to fully understand the evolution of Black speculative production, the independent scene must be more completely engaged and studied.

Thus, “Hidden Stars” was born. LaRose (L.M.) Davis, independent author and scholar, and Jalondra A. Davis, black feminist writer and scholar of speculative fiction and culture, convened this roundtable with independent authors and publishers working throughout the genre, from comics to novels to film. Our intent was threefold: 1) we wanted to begin to document the decades-long project of creatives to build these independent spaces and networks; 2) to document the contributions and impacts of independent authors to the larger field, and 3) begin to assemble a resource guide by identifying and cataloguing some of the most innovative, independent authors writing right now.
What follows is the result of a wonderfully rich, two-hour conversation with some of the pillars of the independent scene. For the sake of brevity, we have trimmed the transcript, in places removing portions from individual responses, but in no way did we change the original meaning or intent of the speakers.

**Jalondra A. Davis:** So I think where we want to start is if everyone can just tell us a little bit about yourself and your work in the Black speculative fiction community.

**Nicole Sconiers:** My name’s Nicole Sconiers and thank you LaRose, LM, and Jalondra for inviting me to participate. It’s interesting because I didn’t always call myself a spec fiction/sci-fi writer. I guess I didn’t feel smart enough to be writing sci-fi, but I have since claimed that title. I’m the author of a collection of spec-fic stories called *Escape from Beckyville: Tales of Race, Hair and Rage*. And that’s how Jalondra and I met, because I was driving cross country to promote my stories in this huge van that was wrapped in the cover of my book. And just going around to different indie venues, spoken word places to talk about my stories, to read my stories. I’ve been published in *Lightspeed*, different sci-fi, spec fiction publications. I have a story out this week actually, in *Speculative City*. I’ve also directed a spec fiction short, that’s based on *Escape from Beckyville*. So I direct and I write spec-fic and sci-fi and horror. I was in *Sycorax’s Daughters* with Nicole. And also *Black from the Future* with Nicole, which is a collection of speculative fiction by Black women writers. So, I’m excited about this conversation and talking to you guys. Thank you.

**Jarvis Sheffield:** Once again, my name is Jarvis Sheffield. I am the creator of Black Science Fiction Society…It’s an online social network that’s created for black creators and this is our thirteenth year. I’m also the Coordinator of Tennessee State University’s media centers on both campuses. We also manage the creator space, actually the Makerspace called the Imagineering Lab, and I’m also the Director of Dragon Con’s diversity track. This is our fourth year.

**Nicole Givens-Kurtz:** I can go next. My name is Nicole Givens Kurtz. I am a science fiction, mystery writer. I write speculative mysteries basically. And I write weird westerns. I’m also the Science Fiction Geek Track Director for Multiverse as well as a programming…part of the programming community for Boskone. So, I do a lot of panels at science fiction conventions, and I am also a writer, but I am also running a very small press called Mocha Memoirs Press and we aim to amplify marginalized voices in speculative fiction. Our most recent anthology was called *Slay: The Stories of the Vampire Noir*, which is an anthology of vampire and hunter story, slayer stories from the African diaspora. So, I do a little bit of everything [laughter] publishing, editing, writing, and programming for science fiction conventions as well.

**Hannibal Tabu:** Alright. Well, hi, my name is Hannibal Tabu. Thank you all for having me here. I am an award-winning journalist, novelist, and comic book writer. I’m the head comic book reviewer at BleedingCool.com. I worked for, I think it was, gosh, sixteen years, at Comic Book Resources before I moved on to that. I am the winner of the 2012 Top Cow Talent Hunt, the 2018-2019 Cultural Trailblazer Award from the city of Los Angeles. In this specifically Black speculative fiction space, I’ve been published in the *Steam Funk* and *Cyber Funk* anthologies from MV Media.
as well as their Black Superhero Anthology, *Black Power*. I’ve written two novels, *Far Away* and *The Crown Ascension*. And I’ve completed a manuscript for a third called *Rogue Nation*, which I am now shopping out to agents and managers. I’m also the writer of *Project Wildfire*, which will be in comic bookstores this November. It just became available for pre-order yesterday, actually. And that will be coming to comic bookstores wherever you are. So, feel free to ask your local comic book retailer for *Project Wildfire*. I’m also the writer of *Time Core* for Wunderman Comics, which is like a time travel book and the upcoming supernatural western, *War Medicine*, which I’m getting art from issue number two from the artist now. I specialize in the comic book space. I have a degree in creative writing from the University of Southern California. And I am not as awful as white people would have you think, just to some of them.

**L.D. Lewis:** I think I’m the last one. So I am L.D. Lewis, L. or LeKesha if you can spell it properly. If not, just go with L. I am one of the founders of *Fiyah Literary Magazine* for black speculative fiction. Been there about five years. Absolutely exhausting, but I love it. I directed this year’s Nebula conference. I’m the director of FiyahCon, and Nicole and Mocha Memoirs Press is actually paneling. I noticed that I’m kind of tangentially like a Jarvis, Jarvis, you won something at the Nebulas this year. You were one of the special award winners, honorees. And then I’m here with Nicole, and then LaRose will be editing an upcoming issue of *Fireside Magazine* of which I am publisher. So I have little connections with everyone. Most of my published short fiction is, let me see, *Anathema, Fiyah, Fireside, Lightspeed*, Neon Hemlock Press. I’ve been in a couple of anthologies, one of which is with Scholastic. I’m kind of all over the place. So, I also edit and write and publish and do event things. And then I also author studies like the, like *Fireside*. *Fireside* and *Fiyah*, they both put out iterations of black speculative fiction reports, which study experiences and output specifically regarding the presence of Black voices in short, genre fiction. The last one of those came out in 2018. We’ll be bringing it back this year. Looking forward to seeing how the market has improved, because it has ever so slightly. But I like to put numbers to the numerous complaints we have about the industry. So, that’s my whole thing.

**LaRose:** Okay. Great! So now we have our panelists. And I think actually, your introductions kind of transition into our next question, which is, how are you defining indie?

**Nicole G-K:** So the question is, what does it mean to be independent? And what does independent mean? For me.

**LaRose:** I think it’s both, what does it mean to you? But then how does that look in the field? So, I don’t want to frame, but I may redirect after I hear your responses.

**Nicole G-K:** [Laughter]. Okay. So, for me, independent or indie is not having one of the major—as a writer, independent for me is self-publishing. Me guiding my own work, producing my own work or not using a traditional press, whether it’s a small press, a medium press, or one of the larger like Tor or Edge or someone framed in being my own publisher. I am independent of these other major publishers in producing my work. It could also mean to a certain degree, you’re unagented, right, and kind of operating on your own, solo, through the publishing streams.
Hannibal: In the spirit of our people, I would “yes and” our sister’s response there and say in the comic book world it’s all those things plus more. In comic books, there are two major publishers. And those two major publishers have 70% of the market cornered. And everybody else who shows up is an afterthought, literally. No matter if they’re a large international publisher like Humanoids, where I did a graphic novel called MPLS Sound, or if they’re, you know, eight people in an office space in West LA, which is another publisher that I worked with. So, indie comes, in my mind, first of all, with, you’re walking into the market without a bankroll. You’re walking into the market without the machinery of a large company, promoting, producing, and verifying the quality of your work.

And indie has a certain stigma from a consumer standpoint…., even if it’s something as big as The Walking Dead, which is an indie book that was independently produced and put out through Image Comics when Robert Kirkman had zero money or if it’s someone like myself on Second Side Publishing with Wildfire. All those are painted with a broad brush with the term indie.

For the creators, it is a mark of pride. It is you know, David versus Goliath. It is standing against an establishment that has denied and marginalized people who look like me, people who look like you for almost ever [laughter]. And we are more than proud to wear that title and claim it as we will build something on our own and something independent in the spirit of my other sister, Ava DuVernay.

Nicole S: To Hannibal’s point, there is this stigma of being considered an indie writer, because it’s like you weren’t good enough to have a mainstream publisher backing you. But when I first wrote Escape from Beckyville, I didn’t reach out to mainstream publishers. My goal was, I’m going to self-publish this, and I’m going to do all the legwork. I’m going to drive across the country. I’m going to talk to the indie bookstores. And I wouldn’t replace that experience, because a lot of those Black indie bookstores that I went to are no longer in existence, you know. So, it was great to be able to get out into the community to talk to people. I mean, they saw me coming basically in my little pink van. So, to just get out there and talk and say, hey, this what I’m doing, and I’m writing spec fiction. And they’re like, oh, they had never heard of spec fiction, some of the communities that I went to. So, to me, it was a give and take. They embraced me as an indie writer, and I was introducing them to a genre that they hadn’t heard of before. So, it was a fulfilling experience for me.

LaRose: And to your point—I’m just gonna interject here—the stigma is particularly around writing. Because I don’t think that you have that kind of stigma around other types of indie production, independent film….I think that people are more open to the idea and understand a pathway to success through film, for music, for musicians, as independent artists, as opposed to looking at writers and thinking you weren’t good enough. As opposed to, as Nicole said, making a deliberate choice to be independent… for a lot of the same reasons that other artists and others working in other mediums choose to be independent, a lot of which has to do with creative control.
Jarvis: Right. I think I’m really simple in most things. Operating outside the mainstream primarily is my definition of being independent. Primarily having complete ownership of your creative work, which gives you the opportunity to have creative control over your characters…. I’ve seen other comic book creators that have submitted their work to major corporations—Nickelodeon, Disney, things of that nature—and it’s like, oh okay, that’s great, that’s really… oh, we really like what you’re, what you’re doing, but we’re going to…can you change this character to a white character? You know what I’m saying? And so, that’s value in itself. Also, I’ve seen a lot of times people want to have that recognition or verification from the mainstream to feel as though their work or what they’re doing is culturally significant. I’m kind of the opposite.

Nicole G-K: So, one of the things I think is super important about being an independent author is not…is that, what Jarvis said which in that creative control, but it also puts you right in what Nicole said, right, lock in step with your people, with your readers, you’re a lot more connected. Because you have to go out and work for them, you have to go find them, you have to go out there and make connections with them. And so, that is and to our point, we talked about Black Science Fiction Society, The State of Black Science Fiction. Prior to the rise of social media, which is when I first got my first novel contract was in 1998… I felt completely disconnected, right, because I would go to cons with my one little book. And that’s what they tell you, right, go to science fiction conventions, you wrote a sci-fi book. And I would go to my vendor table with my one little book.

And first of all, people were like, who is that? And then I was the only one in that space [chuckle] with my one little book. And people were very much, who published it? That’s number one. Oh, you’re not published by Baen. You’re not published by, you know, the larger people. So, you’re not really a writer. But you’re buying all the books with the white guy next to me who self-published all his UFO books. Got it. [Laughter]. So, okay. And two…I actually made a point of having a Black woman on the cover, because growing up I didn’t see that a lot. I didn’t see it…unless it was like an urban contemporary story, right. The Women of Brewster Place or Terry McMillan. Some of those more contemporary stories had Black women on the cover, but not always. And so, I was really hungry as an adult to see myself reflected on covers, and a darker me, right. Like me. [Laughter]. Not, not the racially ambiguous female on my cover. So, I made a point of doing that. But it was really difficult. That was because I was able to as an indie author, right or with a small press to demand that. And it wasn’t a risk for the press, because everything was a risk. Cause everything was e-book, right. This is like 2000, super long ago. But people looked at that, and they would pick it up and say, “you know, I don’t think I can identify with this.” “I don’t know if this book is for me.” But you can identify with a shapeshifting tiger. But you can’t identify with another human being who’s going through, right, trials in a speculative setting. So, being independent allows you to find, to root out those people and actually find those who are actually just as hungry and just as interested in Black speculative fiction as you are, as a fan, as a writer.

LaRose: So, the reason we asked this question is we wanted to get everybody kind of on the same page in terms of what we’re discussing, and what the sort of scope is of what we’re calling
the indie community. And so some people mentioned small presses. But Nicole, in your initial response, you were saying that you think for writers, it is independence from all presses. It's completely guiding the process yourself. So, just in terms of the rest of the conversation, this is the scope. So, we can think about maybe small presses, we can think about self-publishing, completely guiding every part of the process. What it means to have no budget, right, in terms of what you're creating, even if you're creating through a small press. So, that can be the scope of what we're thinking about as we answer the other questions. Jalondra?

Jalondra: So, we wanted to ask, what are some of the most exciting developments that people see happening right now in the indie community? And this can include things you're doing, things you're seeing of other authors, things that are happening in presses, with institutions, with specific works, collections...

Nicole S: Can I talk about something that's… a little subversive in spec fiction and sci-fi is, I'm seeing a trend toward joy. Like I'm seeing these calls for, publications having calls out for, we want stories about joy. Khadijah Queen, and I think it's Kiini Salaam, are working on an anthology about the POC gaze and utopias from a Black perspective or a POC perspective. I think it's Escape Pod has a call for their next issue is on joy. Apparition Lit has a call out for wonder. And I think that living in a pandemic in the country is so much, you know, turmoil, tumult, and divided. People want, not Pollyanna-ish stories, but more affirming stories of the future. And so, and that was and that was subversive for me, because all my stories are dark. I don't think I've ever written a happy ending. So, I'm like, joy, I don't think I can do that [laughter]. But now it's, it's got me thinking like, how can I include more uplifting elements in my writing?

Jalondra: Yes, that is so real Nicole, I've been noticing that too. And I think that my dissertation project, and even writing that I've done has tended towards… I don't like to use dark, but you know, just unsettling. That was one of the things I wrote about your collection. It's very unsettling. So I understand the turn towards joy. It's really interesting, and it's really complex.

Hannibal: Well, I've specifically made a move towards joy myself. Choosing it in both my personal life and in the fiction that I'm writing. I was talking to my creative partner Quinn McGowan about the character Will Watson from Project Wildfire, and our goal with him was to present the inherent goodness that is installed into Black, most Black people in the south, from values, from aunties, from relatives, from being cared for by community. And from that set of values that comes up outside of what is traditionally thought of as a southern idea, which comes across very white, very racist, very exclusionary.

He's a superhero, but literally the first time he meets any conflict, he tries to talk, every time. It rarely ends up with him being able to do that, but he at least tries every time. And as a self-described horrible person, I always say when I'm writing Will, I think what would I do, and I do something completely unlike that. [Laughter]. And that's come across with the project. And I'm hoping when it comes to stores in November that people will really be able to latch on to it.
In the fantasy space, my friend Sebastian Jones is working very hard with HBO Max on his show, *Asunda*, which is going to be set in his fictional universe that he's been working on for, since before I met him, 30 years ago [chuckle]. And to see that come to fruition from a guy who was just making his own little Dungeon and Dragons characters to seeing it realized with contracts at HBO Max is very gratifying. And I would be remiss if I didn't mention a sister named C. Spike Trotman….she posted the other day that she's about to launch her thirtieth Kickstarter. She has made literally more than two million dollars kickstarting projects, speculative fiction, Black specific fiction, very, very niche cast material, and she has created an industry of her own, a lane of her own that nobody else is in and that she dominates….Now there's a lot of notice from bigger publishers for smaller writers, I see Brandon Thomas writing a lot more stuff at DC Comics, which is great to see after he did *Miranda Mercury*, which is like a love letter to Black women in science fiction, or after he did *Excellence*, which is a very strong family drama based in magic that he did for Image Comics. So there's a lot of great things happening. As for myself, I'm doing this speculative fiction story called *False Flag*, which is like GI Joe meets wrestling, but in a world of superheroes. It's super evil. It's so the worst. And I'm doing it for free on operative.net. I'm doing that with illustration from Demar Douglas, and I'm really enjoying finding these spaces of joy under this cloud of doom. That's where a lot of these stories happen. That Will Watson shines, because there needs to be light. That these stories are presenting, you know, finding your sliver of happiness, even when everything else is going wrong. Oh, I'm sorry, I almost missed Tee Franklin, who wrote the very brilliant Bingo Love graphic novel for Image Comics. She's also getting some more notice. I hear she's writing television now, which I'm enormously happy to hear. So, there's a lot of great movement from people who were not in the mainstream, being able to take mainstream money and then bring it home to the family, which I really appreciate.

**LaRose:** I feel like L.D., Fiyah, you all had a call for joy, last year. That you all actually had been thinking about in 2019, or something before, I feel like I remember Davaun saying that this was the moment for it. But you had already determined that was going to be a topic in 2019.

**L.D. Lewis:** Yes.

**LaRose:** So maybe you talk a little bit about that. But I think it gets to another point that we're trying to make about how what's happening on the indie scene sort of anticipates or not even anticipates, but drives kind of what happens in the larger sphere.

**L.D. Lewis:** Let me see, so we settle on themes for issues the summer prior to the publication year. So, our Joy issue was our October issue last year. And it was really well received. But the reason we did it was because you know, state of the world type stuff. But also because the bulk of our submissions normally are based in trauma. And we publish exclusively Black writers… and it's to the point where acquiring editors kind of need a break from those sort of heavy topics. So, the core of the theme was to give our readers a bit of a break there. And it just turned out to be timely. I mean, we do that work to kind of anticipate where there's shortages.
Fiyah became a thing, it was born out of a void in the industry. There was a lack of Black voices. We were like, okay, well, here’s a publication, it’s all entirely Black voices. And so, there was a dearth of Black joy on the scene. And so that’s what we’re doing. So next year, it’ll probably be more Black horror, or we’ll get into some punk themes or whatever. But I think that across the board, especially at Fireside as well, we receive a lot of narratives that are rooted in trauma. So, I think that the joy theme was sort of to dare us to tell stories outside of that home zone, that sort of finding joy in dark places, or just not having the dark places at all. We’re so used to kind of pigeonholing ourselves in that way.

Jarvis: Alright, I’m excited about three specific things. I believe that creators have to hit the industry on both the independent front and the mainstream front, to hit, to push on all of those. And I’m excited about the individuals that Hannibal mentioned, in addition to Sebastian, Brandon Easton, Kevin Grevioux, LaSean Thomas have been making a lot of waves in terms of mainstream. But then on the other side, I’m excited about the explosion,…with the Black sci-fi creatives, and I’ve seen from when I first started, of maybe a dozen people that I would buy stuff from and share with my friends to hundreds now, and that’s comics, that’s books, that’s e-books, independent movies, and shorts. So, now we have a plethora of things to read and enjoy and share with other people. And then lastly, I’m a big fan of the events. Some of the people here I met at events. So, I’m excited that I started off going to maybe two or three events a year and before, pre-COVID, I was up to like fifteen events a year. I was at everything. [Laughter]. If it was a Black event, I was there…but events, like The Black Age of Comics, which was really the first one that started almost thirty years ago in Chicago, and it kind of spread and became…and some other people picked up the mantle and started the East Coast Black Age of Comics. The Motor City Black Age of Comics. The Atlanta Sci-Fi and Fantasy Expo, Onyx Con, and the African Street Festival here in Nashville…. And so, I really enjoy going to those events. And it’s a real community when you go there.

LaRose: I was going to follow up with Jarvis to talk about actually Cons and events. I’ve been going to Dragon Con, I think my first time was maybe in 2011. So minus a pandemic, 10 years. [Laughter]. And I have noticed and I kind of want to think about that a little bit, how our presence in those spaces is changing the field…I remember one of the first panels we had for the State of Black Sci-fi, there was even this sort of conversation about whether we call ourselves science fiction and fantasy authors, right. And it was this back and forth between, well, no, I don’t write that, I write weird stories. I don’t know if I want to embrace that label because of how so often that label pushes us out. So, now in the last ten years, in terms of my experience—and Jarvis can speak more to this, but it sounds to me like he was saying a similar sort of thing—I have seen us more in these spaces, cosplaying, on panels, doing those sorts of things. And can we talk a little bit about how we think that might also be impacting our presence in the space, as writers and as creators, as opposed to just as participants and consumers?

Hannibal: …for me, you know, because I’ve been going to like San Diego Comic Con since ’99, but going to something like Black Speculative Arts Movement or Black Comix Day in San
Diego—which is run by Keithan Jones—to go to those places, is a much different, much warmer environment.

For a Black creative at San Diego Comic Con or Wonder Con, you're in there, your eyes are going left and right, you're looking for opportunities, you're looking for vulnerabilities, you're looking for a place to make yourself welcome, because the energy isn't always there. When you're at, you know, Black Comix Day, everybody loves you. Everybody's happy to see you. Everybody's happy to be there. There's a shift that is happening from our presence. We're showing up, and we are, we're building up certain people. We're building up your N.K. Jemisin. We're building up, as you said, your Brandon Easton, who also wrote on the Netflix series, the Transformers series… So, seeing us… if we elevate our people, then other people are forced to accept them. But it is a community effort. It is a work of banding together in that regard. And it cannot work if, as the old folks used to say, a rising tide raises all boats and we all got to put something in the water.

LaRose: I just want to take a minute to underscore, because I think that's a really important point Hannibal, about our presence shows that there is an audience, which is what drives mainstream or traditional interest in our work. And I think, we can also then look back at the Black Science Fiction Society and the State of Black Sci-Fi as these massive online communities that also show mainstream publishers, you got, 20,000 people in the State of Black Sci-Fi, who probably would be interested in this work by this Black author. Milton is not here, he has talked about that in the past. That was one of his interests in creating that community, was just to show the audience existed.

Nicole S: I have to shout out Rasheedah Phillips, who is one of the originators from the State of Black Sci-Fi, she has this amazing event in Philly, the Afrofuturist Affair, and she's always been such a strong advocate for her fellow writers, creating this safe space for Black writers of sci-fi and spec fiction to come in, read their work, barter with other writers, bring their products to sell. She has an immersive experience this month. I think it's called the Black Quantum, Black Quantum Futurism that's taking place at the Hatfield House, which is this historic house here in Philadelphia. And it's going to be like time capsules and time travel and just bringing Black people in to see what Black people, what our future could look like. Like can you imagine the possibilities of a Black future and also bringing in people to read their work, to get on the mic to talk about what they're doing. So, Rasheedah has always been super supportive.

Nicole G-K: So, I have noticed that at Boskone a few years ago, there was the State of Black Sci-fi meetup. But when I was at Worldcon in Dublin, there was a specific Black sci-fi writer meetup as well, that was just us. And it literally said in the program, if you're not Black, do not attend. Because it was just a safe space in a much larger area. And as Hannibal mentioned it may not always be inviting or warm to us to be able to find others to network, to vibe as Nicole was saying in those spaces. But I also know that from working with programming for a couple of different conventions, that the goal has shifted towards being more inclusive beyond just having a diversity panel, right. Because we are fans of science fiction and fantasy. I can speak to more than
just diversity in spec. And so, I know that from programming from Multiverse in particular, as well as Boskone and ConGregate, they were definitely working towards having panels that were inclusive of different people across the board for every panel, not just that corner here, let’s have a diversity panel. And I think Jarvis’s track at Dragon Con just demonstrates and kind of amplifies at such a large, it’s like the largest con, sci-fi con in the United States after Worldcon, that’s not a comic con, that’s Dragon. Here we are…it’s even worth noting that having a track devoted to Black and people of color speculative fiction tells the other readers, right, in other fandom and other participants, this is something you might…this is not a small thing. This is actually a bigger thing. It’s something that you may want to give your attention to or notice. And even at Worldcon in Dublin, they had highlighted a section in their dealer’s room, a large section that was just devoted to Brazilian science fiction art.

Jarvis: Oh, I just wanted to piggyback. Thank you for mentioning the diversity track at Dragon Con, I think that track is the first track at any major event. Cause in the past, you had your Black panel, and then everybody goes home and goes back to normal, and before the Diversity Track. And with the Diversity Track, we have a whole week of stuff all day, all day long. So, it’s not going back to okay, we’re gonna just do a Black panel and send everybody home again.

L.D. Lewis: So, FiyahCon, which was… which I started yesterday, last year with Brent Lambert, who’s the Social Media Manager over at Fiyah, it is dedicated specifically to centering black, indigenous, and people of color and their experiences and contributions to spec lit. And we are Hugo nominated now for it…because we set that as our focus, it allowed us to do, beyond 101 programming. So, there are no diversity panels. It’s just all of these people from all of these different backgrounds who are able to actually talk craft, without having to properly orient people as to what Afrofuturism is, you know, for the eleventy-billionth time. And it was super well received. We had like eleven, twelve hundred attendants, something like that. Twelve hundred attendants last year. This year, we are at about eight hundred so far. And we’ve added an additional day of programming and it’s really robust and really interesting conversations. Even as different organizations are doing like year-round kinds of panels and things, we were able to still find conversations that haven’t been had yet. So I got the Nebula conference gig off of having directed FiyahCon and I was able to diversify some of that programming, some of the social spaces there as well. And it’s…it’s been really interesting to see how well it’s been received. It’s been interesting to see how a lot of Con runners from predominantly white teams are trying to poach my team members to try and get them to contribute something organically to their space. And I’m like, well, why do you have, you know, a white person who only has white friends trying to diversify their programming, maybe they’re not the person for that job just because they want it. And so, that’s a class I had to teach at Clarion West to just kind of like, these are pretty basic questions you should be asking yourself when staffing your events.

Jalondra: So, I just want to follow up. I’m so glad that you are talking about the importance of institution building. How Black people build institutions and build spaces and build community. And that’s actually the thing that carries up and supports artists and builds audiences and
cultivates new talent. Because when I was in a creative writing program, I wasn’t connected to any of these communities. And I was really pushed to do realist fiction. I think about how transformative it would have been to be connected to these communities. One of the things I find myself within the academy frustrated about, is I feel like with Afrofuturism and all of this excitement—and there’s a lot of white people doing Afrofuturism work, right—I feel like there is kind of a narrative that the white people did it first and then the Black people, then Octavia Butler, and Samuel Delaney came… I feel like there’s a little bit of this linear narrative, because the only space being looked at is that…mainstream science fiction institution, you know what I mean? Like, because the only site being looked at is these particular publications, these particular venues, these particular associations, they’re only seeing the people who…. somehow managed to be included within those spaces and not seeing all of this other stuff that’s happening.

**Nicole G-K:** So, we’re just not going to talk about like, “The Comet,” right. Like, W.E.B. DuBois, right, “The Comet.” It’s the first…for me, I feel like.

**LaRose:** Well, yes.

**Nicole G-K:** The first like, like… the first science did it first.

**LaRose:** Pauline Hopkins serialized the novel.

**Jalondra:** Pauline Hopkins, yes.

**LaRose:** Called *Of One Blood* in the 1800s.¹

**Jalondra:** Yes. Yes.

**LaRose:** You know, and within academia, obviously, where white people, and I, you know, we’re not even going to call it mainstream or whatever, just white people ignore again, the sites of, the places and spaces that Black folks are using to get these stories out. And just because you ignore it, just cause you kind of decide that it’s not worth talking about, or that you’re not aware of it, that doesn’t mean that it’s not there and hasn’t been happening.

**Jalondra:** And I mean, I do see people talk about those older texts… Within the institution, Black people have done that genealogical work of saying, like, oh, DuBois, Pauline Hopkins, all of that….but then I still don’t really see critical engagement of those works. Still not the engagement of how Black people are engaging with these themes of utopia, time travel, body transformation.

**Nicole G-K:** Gender. Yep.

**Jalondra:** Like what Black people are doing in these conversations. That’s kind of what I’m doing now with the mermaids project. Like, it’s not just this thing over here, like, look at this cool example of Black people being mermaids. It’s like, no, Black people are transforming what the mermaid means. Black creators are advancing and creating and innovating certain concepts, but
still not really getting engaged through those concepts, because it's still being engaged as, look at this cool example of Black people also doing this, you know what I mean?

Nicole G-K: Like it's an anomaly.

Jalondra: Yes.

Nicole G-K: We're looked at as anomalies versus being… a living, breathing entity, right…. and again it goes back to the idea that there could be only one. That's why when you see examples of list of “Black Authors You Should Be Reading,” it's the same five authors over and over again, because there's this concept that… and they're only looking at this very narrow—it's like they're looking at Florida, instead of looking at the whole United States. They're only looking at this one area, when it's a much, much larger canvas to be observed. Wait a minute, this isn't just this one small [chuckle] state, it's a whole country.

LaRose: But also… it's a question of even having the tools, right?

Nicole G-K: Right.

LaRose: To understand what they're encountering. And a lot of times, you know, in the year of our Lord 2021… white academics specifically are still not being trained to even have that nuanced conversation Jalondra that you pointed to about how Black folks are not just taking sort of Eurocentric or mermaid mythologies that come out of a European history and lineage, but they're adding to it. They're bringing things that are coming out of African traditions, they're bringing things that come out of Caribbean mythologies. And that quite honestly, those things have been present… were present in these communities prior to contact… So it's not we're taking the notion of mermaid and kind of flipping it—though, that's sometimes what's happening—but we're also… we've always had this idea of this water creature, right, that gels in some ways with European mermaid mythologies, but it's completely different in other ways… because they don't have the tools necessarily to do a complex, thoughtful reading of what is distinctive… about the way that that figure appears in Black texts in sort of African diasporic texts.

Jalondra: I think that that leads well into the subgenres question. What subgenres that were or are being incubated in the indie community have crossed into the mainstream?

Hannibal: Well, I can think of one from the comics books sphere that there's a very common element that happens with Black creators where we'll look at something and say, that doesn't make any sense. That's stupid. It's got to be fixed.

Nicole G-K: To piggyback on Hannibal's point, the demand often comes from us. If you look at Black Twitter, or social media, we are a loud voice. Those shows that don't have us in the writing room, they don't do well. The chorus that arises from Black Twitter and from Black social media around things, wait a minute, no, that's racist, or no, that's not us, or no, that doesn't flow, or who's in your writing room, has kind of forced the hand for major studios to rethink how they
present things, and who is in that writing room. Which is why we’re getting a lot more diverse
talent in the room. But I think that conversation of, if you look at Lovecraft Country, what Misha
Green was able to do with Mark Ruff’s text blew it out the water. Just, I mean, her, just from her
experience, episode seven, Name Yourself: Who Am I, right?… the whole love letter to Black
women and speculative fiction. That whole episode was phenomenal. And it was so well received.
If you look at Lovecraft Country, it had like 12 or 15 Emmy nominations. It’s stuff that we’ve been
doing forever, right. Black horror, Black sci-fi, but because it’s been elevated to such a state, more
people are gonna do it now, right, cause it’s popular. Because it’s successful. It’s been proven that
there actually is a chorus or an audience for that. And that’s the note for indie, right. We do things.
And it has a small blip of popularity amongst us in our niche. And then someone else says, “hey,
what’s this ripple over here.” And they take it, and they amplify it, which is what Hannibal was
saying. And now suddenly, it’s popular. And you’ll see more opportunities grow from that. But
as LaRose said earlier, it does tend to ebb and flow. I remember in the early ‘90s, when Waiting to
Exhale came out, and there was like a gazillion other authors who were writing similar girlfriend
books, and it was like, oh my gosh, we’ve arrived. We’ve arrived. And you can’t even name five of
‘em now. You can’t find three of ‘em on a shelf. And so, [chuckle] it does tend to ebb and flow. But
one of the things that is consistent is Black independent authors and Black independent publishers
continuing to produce work that reflects the needs and wants of our communities.

Jalondra: Yes, I want to follow what you just said Nicole about Black audiences and social
media. I think there’s a way in which I see independent writers, because they’re in control of the
process, because they’re not at the behest of the schedule of a press and trying to find an agent
they are responding more immediately, being a part of these conversations. That’s something that
I wrote about Escape from Beckyville is that there are these conversations that black women were
already having about the Psychology Today article that said Black women were ugly, and the film
The Help, that the stories were directly engaged with. And I think that’s really powerful, because it
provides a window into this work for Black people that’s not only through the window of science
fiction. Like people who weren’t already fans come into a lot of this work in different ways.

LaRose: Does anybody have any other thoughts on things that are happening right now that
you’re seeing in the indie world, that we’re going to see in like two years in the mainstream? Or
that we potentially will see, as long as this interest in representing us actually persists? Which, who
knows when it will ebb again? But what’s happening now? What do you think is poised to break
through into more mainstream spaces? And I think we have to think about that language as well,
because it continues to be problematic.

Hannibal: I would keep an eye on LaGuardia by Nnedi Okorafor. It’s a science fiction comic
that she did with one of the smaller publishers, not one of the big two. And it posited the idea of
plant consciousnesses and human consciousnesses living side by side in the societal thing. The
development of the idea was really deep, and I just, I was reading it like, yeah, I can see this in the
movie, this could check out. So, whether she does it or someone tries to steal it, I don’t know. But I
would not be surprised to see some elements of LaGuardia on your screen within the next few years.

Jarvis: I’m going to piggyback off of Hannibal. You’re going to continue to see more independent work making its way to mainstream like William Hayashi’s Discovery. Where it centers around Black people who have been living on the dark side of the moon before Neil Armstrong. There’s been like a Jack and Jill type of recruiting that’s been done with the geniuses and people of that nature. A Black ilk, they’ve created their own society, and have been in hiding and they get discovered. That has already, from what I understand, been picked up by, I think Netflix.

Nicole G-K: That’s right. Yep.

Jarvis: Yvette Kendall has a series called God Maps, where they explore where the soul actually goes after you die. These scientists have created this technology to… at the moment of death, it kind of tags the soul as it leaves the body, and they’ve been tracking it. And she has had her stuff picked up, and is in the process of development. So, you’re going to see a lot of cherry picking of successful work. Sort of like the entertainment industry. I was privileged to be in the room with… I can’t think of his name right now. Record executive. He came to Tennessee State University years ago, and I taped his speech. And he was basically telling us like, how do we get on. People were trying to give him tapes and DVDs of their work and stuff, and he’s like, that’s not how it works. We pick up people that already have a buzz, that they’ve proven that they have an audience. And if you can have an audience in your region, or state or whatever, we pick those people and then work with them. So, you’ll see a lot of cherry picking like that happen. Which can be a good or a bad thing.

LaRose: And are there genres? I think about for instance, steamfunk, as something that we definitely saw going very strong in the indie community and P. Djèlí Clark with A Dead Djinn in Cairo and The Black God’s Drum.


LaRose: Where we’re starting to see more steamfunk and Nisi Shawl had a steampunk novel And we’re starting to see that more in the mainstream. But we definitely saw that in indie writers before it had that kind of crossover. I think a lot of that is coming out of Tor right now. So, are there other genres right now that we haven’t seen in the mainstream, but that we’re seeing in the indie community that you think we’re going to see in the mainstream later? Because we want to talk about it right now, so we can point back to it in two years and be like, look. We said it. They said it. Now respect their authority.

Nicole G-K: So, I write futuristic noir, which is basically cyberpunk slash futuristic noir. They’re all mysteries set in the future, with a PI, think Blade Runner, but with a Black female lead. And I used to be the only Black woman who did that. But I’m starting to see a growing number of Black women authors writing mystery speculative noir. I’m very happy about that because I was
the only one for a very long time. But I definitely see that they’re not tagging it as futuristic noir, it’s either cyberpunk, or they’re just tagging it a regular science fiction story. But at its origins, it’s a mystery in a speculative setting. I think that genre is going to tend to grow because people love mysteries. There is a rise of people who are watching true crime as they go to bed at night, or just to calm down. People who like a good mystery, but are kind of sick of the ordinary settings, are turning to that genre.

**Hannibal:** I was just going to piggyback on what Nicole was saying, because earlier this year, I was in two anthologies, from Milton Davis, of course, *Cyberfunk!* and *Noir is the New Black* from Fair Square Comics, where I was writing, as she said, a mystery of sorts in a futuristic setting. I definitely think that’s the aesthetic, because when costume designers and production designers look at things, the lines and the aesthetics of that being applied to black aesthetic are very visually appealing. A lot of people have learned from the way that Issa Rae used lighting in *Insecure* to light dark-skinned people. They are like, oh, we can do this now. We’ve learned something we can steal. So, I definitely think that will definitely be a factor. I’ve always seen ironically, that Milton is ahead of the curve, because he was the one who did the steamfunk anthology. I was in that.

**Nicole G-K:** He was. Yep.

**Hannibal:** He had *Cyberfunk!* His new plan, I believe he talked about, is doing spyfunk.

**Nicole G-K:** Spyfunk. Yep.

**Hannibal:** Which is a black spy thing, because they won’t make Idris Elba, James Bond. They’re like, okay, suckers, we can do it ourselves.

**Nicole G-K:** We got it!

**Hannibal:** And off we go. So if you see Will Smith popping back into, you know, the spy thing in a few years, that’s probably why.

**Nicole G-K:** I’m also in *Cyberfunk!* And actually Milton and I had long conversations about… I’m a huge cyberpunk fan, obviously. I’m a big Philip K. Dick fan. And so, one of the things that we actually talked about a lot with the *Cyberfunk!* anthology is, where do we want it to go? Because cyberfunk by its definition is high tech, low life, which is really depressing. But he was like, I don’t want to do the same stuff that cyberpunk has done before hence *Cyberfunk!* And it’s a very different anthology as Hannibal can probably attest. These are not your ordinary cyberpunk stories. They have elements of hope. They have elements of other things that aren’t oriented in trauma. They don’t all have to have a murder, or some horrific thing that happens, or discussions on what it means to be human. It’s just how do I exist in this space and find joy? I love the idea of cyberfunk, I hope it catches on. I hope it grows. I expect that it will, because it’s a very unique twist on cyberpunk. Milton’s diesel funk is ahead of the curve as well. With futuristic noir, the noir anthology that Hannibal was talking about as well. We write those things. If you think about the Sherlock Holmes comic that was written, set in Harlem, *Watson and Holmes.* I mean, we’re just
always ahead of the curve with these types of things. Even though they may not be labeled as such, they’re definitely part of a growing trend of, here’s what we do that’s awesome. And how we make twists and turns and transform things. That’s kind of just… that’s the beauty of who we are. We take what is on the table or something and then we reconstruct the table to fit our needs.

**Hannibal:** That’s a hip-hop aesthetic. Everything that you’re talking about is hip-hop, or jazz, or blues, or griot. I mean, that’s, that’s the black aesthetic inside and out all day.

**Jalondra:** Speaking of cyberfunk as a movement towards hope, one of the things I’ve been noticing at academic conferences lately are critiques of dystopia. And trying to talk about hope more in the midst of these kinds of genres. One of the things I would like to see is for the Black writers that are doing this to be centered, or at least factored in and read in the context of that conversation. Not read after the fact like, oh look, they’re doing it too, but like, oh, no, this is actually a driving factor, not just an afterthought.

**Nicole G-K:** And that’s the thing though with indie. That’s why we ask people to read indie, because they are at the forefront of the next large movement. By the time it’s mainstream, it’s already been active in indie circles for a while, right?

**LaRose:** I’m going to tell the story about my series. I truly believe that one of the problems that I had when I was shopping my series in 2010, that people didn’t know what to do with something that wasn’t about Black trauma. I really think that was one of the massive things that I encountered. But now Black people are saying… we’re tired, our experiences are more than our trauma. We are more than our trauma. Our experiences are more than trauma. And we want to see that reflected in books as well.

**Jarvis:** One theme that has been emerging is the strong Black female lead. I want to see that continue to thrive. That’s been in the independent world for as long as people been writing. But stuff like *Lovecraft Country*, *Discovery*, *Sleepy Hollow*, and anything that Janelle Monáe is in. Those are strong Black female leads that have been coming to the forefront.

**Nicole S:** The flip side of what Jarvis was saying about the strong Black woman lead is the woman who’s dealing with trauma. And I’m seeing more writers talking about their struggles with PTSD, with trauma. Zin E. Rocklyn talks about writing as a woman who has suffered PTSD and writes about trauma in her work. And I love Sumiko Saulson, her book *Solitude*.

**Nicole G-K:** Yes, Sumiko. We publish her.

**Nicole S:** Yes. She’s awesome. In her book *Solitude*, she talks about just having this radical self-acceptance, and how mental health challenges are stigmatized in the Black community, and how it is transgressive to talk about being a woman who suffers from a mental illness. One of her characters is a woman who is housebound and an empowered character. So I am seeing more women speaking out about their own trauma, their own PTSD, their own feeling othered whether it’s in their community or in their own skin, and how they transcribe that into their work.
Nicole G-K: In my *Fawn & Brisco* series, the protagonist Fawn actually has PTSD from the job that she actually does as a detective. It’s in this futuristic setting, of course, but it kind of enables her ability to do some of the work she needs to do. And it’s dealing with that because I think especially after the year we just all collectively had–

Nicole S: Yeah.

Nicole G-K: There’s definitely a lot of residual mental health that we need to look at. But I also think to Jarvis’s point, a strong Black female lead, it depends on who’s writing the character. I go back to this again and again, who is in your writing room? Because sometimes… it’s a Black female lead, and it’s not authentic. It’s not… it’s kind of destructive in how she’s depicted. So, it’s really important, I know “I’m rooting for everybody Black!” but I need to see who’s writing that character. Because Misha Green writing a character is very different from J.J. Abrams writing a Black female lead. And so, I need to know who’s behind that work, because that’s very important in how that character shows up in the movie, or film, or TV show.

LaRose: I think that that’s an important point, because a lot of what you all have been talking about as to how these ideas are moving out of the indie space into the mainstream is through film. So, now we’re talking about a whole other sort of apparatus that we have to think about, because it’s not just that you’re dealing with publishers and trying to make sure that the resulting book stays true to your vision, but also that now we’re talking about where we have writers’ rooms, and where they may option the rights to your story, but then you don’t know who is writing the story, who is translating your character, and whether or not that person has the insight to be able to authentically translate that character, especially if you as the writer are not involved in that process. I know N.K. Jemisin, a couple of her things have been pulled for adaptation, and I know that with *The Hundred Thousand Kingdoms*, I think that’s the one she’s actually adapting herself. But yeah, that becomes a massive factor. Because what gets lost? What gets flattened out? What gets jettisoned? Because people don’t understand the significance of it in the first place. Because there are not enough people reflecting, who are connected to those identities in the writers’ room.

Hannibal: Real quickly. Could I just tell a real quick story. One of my friends, Lamont Magee, was one of the writers on *Black Lightning*. And when they were doing the Crisis on Infinite Earths crossover, there was a moment when Black Lightning walks into the room with Diggle and Lamont spent three weeks arguing with people and producers and writers that when they walked in the room the dude gave him a head nod. Gave him the nod.

Nicole G-K: The head nod.

Hannibal: The head nod. What’s up.

Nicole G-K: The head nod. [Laughter].
**Hannibal:** He was like, you have no idea how hard I fought for that. And the importance of it, that it would be on screen. That it would be recognized. Because it was important that when these two Black men in a space with mostly white people walk in, there was that moment of recognition.

**Nicole G-K:** The head nod. Oh my god. Yes.

**Hannibal:** And I was like, yeah, that’s what’s up. That’s why we got to be in the room. Exactly what you’re saying.

**Nicole G-K:** And Black Twitter erupted. I cannot tell you how many people tagged me and did you see that head nod? Did you see it? Yasss! Oh my god, it was perfect. Okay. I’ll calm down now.

**Hannibal:** [Laughter].

**Jalondra:** Do you all in your platforms and your work, intentionally seek to move the genre or genres or in new directions? And if so, how?

**Jarvis:** With all of my platforms and the little writing that I actually do, I think it’s important that we are socially responsible and put images and themes out there that we want to see repeated. Not just, okay, I’m gonna go with what’s going on right now. And not just copy what somebody else is doing. We see that in all the little inventions that you’ve seen on *Star Trek* our whole life, whether it’s the cell phone, or the tablet, or the flat screen TV. And so, just like people see those inventions on sci-fi, and okay, well they figure out how to make that a reality. We need to put the images out there that we want to see in the future. So, other people can figure out, okay, how can we move this, move our country and our world toward that reality?

**Hannibal:** I totally agree with what Jarvis is saying. And I’m gonna piggyback on that. One of my elders in the Los Angeles poet community is this sister named V. Kali. When she first met me, I’d been writing all these break-up poems and that kind of stuff. And she was like, “have you ever thought about writing what you want to happen, and not what did happen?” And it changed my entire perspective on things. And I really, I really looked at that as science fiction being tomorrow’s science fact, in the way that Jarvis was saying. And really thought about what we’re doing as writers, we are creating these myths, we’re creating these paradigms, we’re creating these ideas that will then influence the actual lives of actual people. And that’s very important in the work that I’m doing, because I got two kids, that they always see me, to quote another one of my poetic mentors, Michael Datcher, that my Black man life lives up to my Black man rhetoric. That the work that they see me put out is work that verifies them, that lifts them up, that shows them in a light of possibility and what can be. So, yeah that’s super important to me. I’m writing a superhero book called *Project Wildfire*. It has a very aspirational element, even though most of the people in the book are awful, horrible liars, doing terrible, terrible things, and smashing up stuff. But there has to be a light in all of that. And that light has to shine.

**Nicole S:** I’ve been more intentional in my writing about writing older Black women characters as the main characters, because I think a lot of sci-fi and spec fiction leans toward
younger characters. And I'm guilty of that in my own work, like, okay, she's got to be 25 to 30. And as I'm getting older, I want to see middle-aged women not just seen as the elder, but in their full humanity, like being on a dating app or something. Just saying that older Black women exist and not just to save the world, as Whoopi Goldberg said. But they exist to, you know, do things in their community and be these complex characters. So that's what I'm working on and being intentional about.

**L.D. Lewis:** I do something similar. My novella *A Ruin of Shadows* from 2018, the protagonist is in her late 50s. And then it still got shelved somehow as YA, but that's another conversation entirely. All of my short stories have so far been kind of just personal experiments. So, that one came about… well, I don't know how to write fight scenes, and it turns out that I do them really well. And it became a thing. And my short *Moses* ended up reprinted at *Lightspeed*, long listed in one of the “best of” anthologies, I don't remember which one it was. That one was centering an addict, but who had super powers. So, trying to balance those two things. Because I had never seen an addict portrayed in a speculative literature setting. So, I don't know about trying to push things forward, but I'm just trying to fill gaps in the stories that I'm seeing.

**Nicole G-K:** So, I write mysteries, as I mentioned before, but one of the things I do write also are weird westerns. I may be the only Black woman writing weird Western fiction set in the 1900s New Mexico Territory. I love westerns… but there's a gap there, right? It's a gap with westerns. They're usually depicted as, with the exception of Maurice Broaddus' *Buffalo Soldiers* and a few others, they're often depicted as, white folks in the West. And they negate the stories of Native people there. They negate the story of the Chinese immigrants who are building the railroad. They negate the former slaves that escaped to that area. They negate all the people of color in those spaces. Like L.D., I love westerns, but I saw a gap. And so, I wrote stories—and of course, they're speculative because I'm a nerd—about experiences in New Mexico. I lived in New Mexico for six years, which actually helped feed the magical quality of those stories. And I center Black women in almost all of those stories, because those stories don't get told. I did a lot of research, a lot of writing. I don't know if it pushes anything forward, but it definitely adds other stories or additional voices to the weird western genre, which is almost exclusively white male. Because I like those stories… first and foremost, the writer pleases the writer. But also, I didn't see those stories, I thought those stories should be added and told. Secondly, I write speculative mysteries. Again, you don't often see Black female protagonist PI stories set in the future. And so, my Cybil Lewis series, my *Kingdom of Aves* series, which is speculative fantasy, mystery fantasy, and then my *Fawn & Briscoe* series, they all star Black women detectives, doing what you normally see white male detectives doing in those spaces. I write those stories because I like them. And the repeated thing I tell people is that Black folks aren’t a monolith. We all have very different interests and things that we love. And so, the stories that I write are the things that I love. I love mysteries. I love spec. I love fantasy. I love westerns. Does that help another reader who's like, “oh, you know, I like mysteries, I like mysteries in the future, but I never see this character.” I hope so. Growing up I didn't see a lot of the things I love reflected as Black women doing it. My goal with the work that I produce, is that
it finds a reader who feels validated and seen by reading, you know, Cybil investigating a crime or Prentiss using her Hawk abilities and her magic. So that's my goal as a writer. Our mission is to amplify marginalized voices in speculative fiction over at Mocha Memoirs Press. And so, the stories that we tend to pick, not always, but most of the time, are those that are kind of hard to fit. Sometimes they're mash-ups. Sometimes they're just a little odd and outside of what the mainstream would like, either the voice it's being told in, or the subject matter. And so, we try to produce works that fall into those cracks that don't often get heard or seen or read or accepted.

LaRose: So, I think that a lot of us who write are writing in some ways to what we wish we would have seen, or what we wish we could see now or what we wish we would have seen as kids. When I started writing and decided to self-publish, it was because you weren't seeing hardly any—I guess they might have been out there; if they were I don't know what they were—stories of Black boys in fantasy worlds. And you still barely see that. But the landscape has definitely changed since my first novel became available in 2010. And I wrote it because I had a cousin who loved fantasy. And I'm like, he should be able to read about people who look like him. And when I couldn't think of a book to buy and couldn't find any books to buy, that's when I started writing. And the other thing that was always on my agenda was, again, that notion that we're not a monolith. And so much of what you see, particularly written about Black children, is Black children engaged in these really serious adult issues, right. I mean, obviously, a lot of times to have a book and to have conflict, it's not “my peanut butter and jelly sandwiches is missing” for a teenager. That's not the conflict. But… Black children don't always have to be the next Civil Rights hero. They don't have to be facing down the police. We can tell stories about other kinds of conflict for Black children. And particularly when that's something that we see all the time, Black kids need escape, you know. Like, this is on the news all the time. This is happening in the streets. And yes, it is important to talk about that. And it's important to give them books that help them think through those experiences, but it's also important to give them places that say, you can have other kinds of possibilities for your life. And so, for me, when I started writing my Shifters Novel series, I wanted to start from a space where these Black children were empowered. And the world that matters is not this world. It's a whole other dimension that I created, where everybody is like these Black children. And that was purposeful. Sometimes let kids breathe different air. And again, those books are really important. I'm not saying that they're not important, I'm just saying kids deserve other stories as well.

Jalondra: I think it speaks to balance and variety. We need to have range and encompass and bigness to the art. And I think what tends to get the attention and the support tends to be that that coheres most with what is already familiar. So, my critique wouldn't necessarily be of the author, but of the larger context for what is getting emphasized versus what we don't see. Like, what's the larger context for that? And how do we keep creating? I think this kind of institution building that all of you've been involved with is really key to how you create a larger canvas, you know, so that everyone can find what resonates with them.
Hannibal: I was just going to say real quickly, that one of the things that motivates me in my writing was growing up watching the *Flintstones* and the *Jetsons* and saying, there’s no place for me in the future or the past. So, I was like, yeah, I can fix that. I can, I can do something about that. I got these right here. And I started writing. And later on, I heard the story of Martin Luther King encouraging Nichelle Nichols to stay on *Star Trek*. So yeah, I just think it’s really important that we just keep pushing the discussion and making the work for ourselves, because we have to be the first audience. And we have to satisfy the reader that we are before we can satisfy anybody else.

Notes


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Maurice Broaddus: http://mauricebroaddus.com/

L.M. Davis: https://www.lmdaviswrites.com/books

Tee Franklin: http://teefranklin.com/

Tenea D. Johnson: https://www.teneadjohnson.com/

Sebastian Jones: https://www.strangercomics.com/

Kai Leakes: https://kwbp5f.wixsite.com/kai-leakes

L.P. Kindred: https://twitter.com/LPKindred?ref_src=twsrc%5Egoogle%7Ctwsamp%5Eserp%7Ct

Victor Lavalle: http://www.victorlavalle.com/

L. D. Lewis: https://ldlewiswrites.com/

Alicia McCalla: https://aliciamccalla.com/

Christopher Priest: https://lamerciepark.com/
Zin E. Rocklyn: https://www.terizin.com/
Sumiko Saulson: https://sumikosaulson.com/
Nicole Sconiers: http://nicolesconiers.com/
Hannibal Tabu: http://www.hannibaltabu.com/411/
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Events
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Afrofuturist Affair: https://www.afrofuturistaffair.com/
Atlanta Sci-Fi and Fantasy Expo: https://www.atlantascifiexpo.com/
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Jalondra A. Davis is a Black feminist cultural critic and University of California Postdoctoral Fellow at the University of California, San Diego. Her work has been published in the Museum of Science Fiction’s Journal of Science Fiction, anthologies The Politics of Ugliness and Challenging Misrepresentations of Black Womanhood, and is forthcoming in the Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts and the Routledge Handbook to Alternative Futurisms. Her new book project in progress, Sea People: Mermaids and the Black Atlantic focuses on aquatic mythologies in African diasporic literature, art, and performance. She is also the author of a novel entitled Butterfly Jar.

As L.M. Davis, LaRose Davis is a YA/MG author who writes about shapeshifters, aliens, immortals, and witches. L.M. Davis is author of Interlopers: A Shifters Novel, Posers: A Shifters Novel, Forgers: A Shifters Novel, and skinless: A Novel in III Parts. Additionally, Davis is a scholar of African American and Native American literatures and cultures, with particular interest in the speculative production of these communities. Finally, she has worked as a background actor on a variety of SFF projects including "Black Panther," "Raising Dion," "Spiderman: Homecoming," and "Lovecraft Country." She has recently written and directed her first speculative short film, titled "Fevered Dreams."