



Afrofuturism Discussion Guide

Adapted from [Soupbone Collective](#) discussions in Nov-Dec 2020
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Discussion Overview

Afrofuturism, as a concept and movement, has come to represent a rich history in literature, film, music, art, and philosophy that engages with questions of race, technology, and the future of society. Mark Dery notes that the “sub-legitimate status of science fiction as a pulp genre in Western literature mirrors the subaltern position to which blacks have been relegated throughout American history”—with this in mind, we take Afrofuturism to be a significant theoretical framework through which we encounter race and identity, the effects of colonialism, theories of technology and freedom, pan-Africanism, theories of modernity, and the making of the modern world. In these discussions, we explore the aesthetic and cultural impact of Afrofuturist media, along with themes of gender, sexuality, and class as they relate to Black communities and technology’s fingerprints in everyday life.

Disclaimer: this selection does not represent a definitive or canonical introduction to Afrofuturism. These were simply the texts and media we were interested in and considered accessible enough to cover a large range of themes and topics. Afrofuturism is a rich and diverse genre worth exploring further; for recommendations and suggestions, please see the end of this syllabus.

Virtual Field Trip: [Namwali Serpell lecture](#) on November 18, 2020.

Week 1: Film, Culture, & Aesthetic Origins

Discussion materials:

- ❑ Ytasha Womack, introduction to *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture*.
- ❑ Sun Ra, [Space is the Place](#) (1974)
- ❑ Mark Dery, “Black to the Future: Interviews with Samuel Delany, Greg Tate, and Tricia Rose”

Opening poem: Robert Hayden, “[O Daedalus, Fly Away Home](#)”

Opening question: (insp. by the [Golden Record](#)) if you had to send something “representative of humanity” into space for extraterrestrials to discover, what would you send?

“[African Americans] inhabit a sci-fi nightmare in which unseen but no less impassable force fields of intolerance frustrate their movements; official histories undo what has been done to them; and technology, be it branding, forced sterilization, the Tuskegee experiment, or tasers, is too often brought to bear on black bodies. Moreover, the sub-legitimate status of science fiction as a pulp genre in Western literature mirrors the subaltern position to which blacks have been relegated throughout American history.”

—Mark Dery

Discussion questions:

1. When you hear the phrase “science fiction”, what comes to mind?
 2. In *Space is the Place*, what are some visually and/or artistically striking moments? Costuming? Sound? How does the film’s imagery create an iconography of the future?
 3. A prominent theme of Afrofuturist work is the notion of entangled temporalities. As Mark Dery asks: “Can a community whose past has been deliberately rubbed out, and whose energies have subsequently been consumed by the search for legible traces of its history, imagine possible futures? Furthermore, isn’t the unreal estate of the future already owned by the technocrats, futurologists, streamliners, and set designers—white to a man—who have engineered our collective fantasies?”
 4. Science fiction is rife with space narratives, and one might consider the way of colonialism and the “final “frontier” intersect: who gets to venture into the unknown? Who is allowed the freedom of adventure? There’s a tendency, in space narratives, to say that space “transcends” racial and socio-economic boundaries. Do you think this is true?
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Week 2: “Shall I tell you, then, that we exist?”

Discussion Materials:

- Short story: Octavia Butler, “Speech Sounds”
- *Short story: Nnedi Okorafor and Wanuri Kahiu, “[Rusties](#)”
- Poems: Keith S Wilson, “[Black Matters](#)” / Danez Smith, “[dear white america](#)”

**Okorafor has noted that the genre she writes is “Africanfuturism,” rather than “Afrofuturism” — a mode of fiction that is Africa-centric, rather than generated from within the African American community, and more directly rooted in African culture, history, mythology and point-of-view; it does not privilege or center the West.*

Opening question: what words or phrases do you associate with science fiction? What types of encounters have you had with sci-fi jargon / language?

“They would run through the downtown canyons with no real memory of what the buildings had been or even how they had come to be. Today’s children gathered books as well as wood to be burned as fuel. They ran through the streets chasing one another and hooting like chimpanzees. They had no future. They were now all they would ever be.”

— Octavia Butler, “Speech Sounds”

Discussion questions:

1. In “Speech Sounds,” we see the initial suspicion with which Rye inhabits her surroundings and the setting; is this so apocalyptic, so far off from how Black people must inhabit spaces in our present society? What does it mean to be at odds or at ease with one’s environment?
2. AI and bodies are prominent themes in science fiction, and “Rusties” explores our fascination with robots—machines perceived as cold, non-sentient beings. But where do we draw the line between machine and human?
3. Aside from the epistemological anxieties that robots evoke, there’s also a capitalist dimension to their presence, as well as the presence of technology at large in “Rusties”—i.e. the Copkiller bracelets, which points toward the act of capitalizing off of tragedies and creating consumer products out of things that don’t seem alive but actually are. As the narrator notes: “The thing was, people liked and obeyed the traffic robot cops more than the human police.” Why is it easier to “obey” technology than to obey humans? Why and how does technology come across as “authoritative”?
4. Consider these two quotes in conversation with one another: “i reach for black folks & touch only air” (danez smith), and “dark matter is invisible. / we infer it: how light bends around a black body, / and still you do not see black halos, even here, / my having told you plainly where they are” (Keith S Wilson). Continuing the thread of “nothing” and ontological terror from last week, what does it mean to come from nowhere? To build a community out of negative space? What can we say about the *materiality* of Black experiences and existences?

Week 3: Building Worlds through Music

Discussion Materials:

- ❑ Listen: Janelle Monáe, [Dirty Computer](#) [[Emotion Picture](#)] and/or [The ArchAndroid](#)
- ❑ Album liner notes: [The ArchAndroid](#) & [The 10 Droid Commandments](#)
- ❑ Read: Dan Hassler-Forest, “The Politics of World-Building: Janelle Monáe’s Wondaland”
- ❑ Optional: Donna Haraway’s “A Cyborg Manifesto”

Opening question: if you had to build a world from scratch, what would you include in it? What *wouldn’t* you include?

“the hegemonic appropriation and commodification of world-building practices from fantasy and sf traditions has come to typify the age of the global media conglomerate, from the Disney-owned Marvel Cinematic Universe to HBO’s crossmedia juggernaut *Game of Thrones*. Most of these popular imaginary worlds offer mappable and therefore “knowable” environments [...]”

—Hassler-Forest

Discussion questions:

1. What is it about worldbuilding that comes across as so appealing to audiences? Hassler-Forest mentions the importance of worldbuilding in fantasy and SF fiction—think the Star Trek and Star Wars franchises, D&D, Marvel, Game of Thrones, etc. Why and how do audiences become invested in fantastical, fictional worlds?
2. What world(s) do Monae’s albums create and evoke? Let’s take a look at some of the references throughout Monae’s discography—cultural, aural, visual influences—what materials does she use for worldbuilding?
3. Hassler-Forest notes that Monae’s worlds aren’t explicitly anti-capitalist; that is, as subversive as they claim to be, they cannot escape a capitalist worldview. If we think back to conversations on colonialism relating to science fiction—is it possible to imagine a world without capitalism?
4. What role does surveillance play in *Emotion Picture*? What can we say about the way Black bodies are surveilled, recorded, and invaded in this ‘imagined’ future?

Further recommendations:

Critique/Theory

- ❑ Womack, Ytasha. *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture*. 2013.
- ❑ Ed. Reynaldo Anderson, Charles E. Jones. *Afrofuturism 2.0: The Rise of Astro-Blackness*. 2015.
 - ❑ Gipson, Grace D. “Afrofuturism’s Musical Princess Janelle Monáe: Psychedelic Soul Message Music Infused with a Sci-fi Twist.”
- ❑ Kilgore, De Witt Douglas. *Astrofuturism: Science, Race, and Visions of Utopia in Space*. 2003.
- ❑ Nelson, Alondra. “Introduction: Future Texts,” in [Afrofuturism](#), an issue of *Social Text*. 2002.
- ❑ Lavender III, Isiah. *Afrofuturism Rising: The Literary Prehistory of a Movement*. 2019.

Nonfiction / Articles

- ❑ The Combahee River Collective [statement](#). 1977.
- ❑ Butler, Octavia. “[The Lost Races of Science Fiction](#).” 1980.
- ❑ Kimberly Drew and Jenna Wortham, *Black Futures* (excerpt [here](#)). 2020.
- ❑ Hartman, Saidiya. *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Social Upheaval*. 2020.

Fiction

- ❑ Beatty, Paul. *The Sellout*. 2015.
- ❑ Butler, Octavia. *The Parable of the Sower*. 1993.
- ❑ Butler, Octavia. *Wild Seed*. 1980.
- ❑ du Bois, W.E.B. “The Comet.” 1920.
- ❑ Delany, Samuel. “Aye, and Gomorrah.” 1967.
- ❑ Ellison, Ralph. *Invisible Man*. 1952.
- ❑ Serpell, Namwali. *The Old Drift*. 2019.

Poetry

- ❑ Keith S. Wilson, “[Heliocentric](#)”
- ❑ Eve L. Ewing, *Electric Arches*. 2017.

Art

- ❑ Sable Elyse Smith, *Ordinary Violence*. 2018.
- ❑ [\[the black man in the cosmos\]](#) by Kitoko Diva and her [NTS live show](#)

Music

- ❑ Soupbone’s Afrofuturism [Spotify Playlist](#)
- ❑ FKA twigs, *Magdalene*
- ❑ clipping., “The Deep”

Film

- ❑ *Sun Ra: A Joyful Noise*, dir. Robert Muggge (1980)
- ❑ *Get Out*, dir. Jordan Peele (2017)
- ❑ *Black Panther*, dir. Ryan Coogler (2018)
- ❑ *Blade*, dir. Stephen Norrington (1998)
- ❑ *Afronauts*, dir. Frances Bodomo (2014)
- ❑ *Coded Bias*, dir. Shalini Kantayya (2020)