LITERARY AFROFUTURISM
IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY



EDITED BY
ISIAH LAVENDER III
AND
LISA YASZEK

Imagining Futures in Full Color

Isiah Lavender III and Lisa Yaszek

"Brrrrrriiiiiiiiiiiinng!" The alarm clock sounds off in 1940 (R. Wright 3). The reality-check for America for which Richard Wright called with the opening word of his blistering masterpiece *Native Son* (1940) is happening right now, and it is called Afrofuturism. Amiri Baraka's urgent "SOS" in 1969—"Calling all black people, man woman child"—has finally been answered by Afrofuturism (line 2). That is to say, "reality rolled over" with these calls to action, as N. K. Jemisin imagines in 2004's "Too Many Yesterdays, Not Enough Tomorrows," when she implores readers to wake up (12)! And we have! Black people have finally wrested control of their own future images, using the speculative art form known as Afrofuturism to reboot black identity, challenge white supremacy, and imagine a range of futures in full color.

Such changes have not gone unnoticed. In his 1999 essay "Racism in Science Fiction," author Samuel R. Delany predicted that the largely white science fiction (SF) community would pay attention when "black writers start to number thirteen, fifteen, twenty percent of the total . . . [and when] the competition might be perceived as having some economic heft" (386). It turns out that Delany was correct. As authors of color from around the world have become increasingly central to the production of speculative fiction, hate bubbles have risen to the surface in events like the RaceFail '09 flame war, the Gamergate controversy of 2014, and the block-voting

controversies of Puppygate 2015 and 2016, which unfolded at the heart of one of SF's oldest and most revered traditions: the Hugo award ceremonies.[1] In each case, a relatively small group of American-born white men loudly (and in some cases, violently) proclaimed that artists of color were out to ruin the fun of popular culture for everyone with their insistence on exploring issues of diversity and social justice.

What Delany didn't predict was that even larger segments of arts and entertainment community would actively support Afrofuturist visions of tomorrow. Consider, for instance, Netflix's adaptation of the Marvel Comic *Luke Cage* (2016), which was so wildly popular that it supposedly broke Netflix's servers the day after the first season was released; Ryan Coogler's international blockbuster *Black Panther* (2018), which made a record-shattering $427 million worldwide in its opening weekend, while garnering a 97% Rotten Tomatoes ranking from more than 284 film critics; and web series such as *Send Me* (2016), which earned an Emmy nomination for its depiction of black volunteers who travel back in time to the Antebellum Era (Nickalls; Desta; Mills). In music, Janelle Monáe has earned accolades from Billboard, the NAACP, and *Glamour* magazine for successfully repurposing the figure of the female android as a symbol of discrimination against all minorities, and the experimental hip-hop group clipping has earned a 2017 Hugo nomination for their 2016 album *Splendor & Misery*, which revolves around a mutineering starship slave and the computer that loves him (Heller). Meanwhile, corporate titan Intel has responded to Gamergate by channeling $300 million into a brand new "Diversity in Technology" initiative, and the SF community has sent an equally firm message to the architects of Puppygate by giving the Hugo Award for best novel of 2016, 2017, and 2018 to African American author N. K. Jemisin's Broken Earth trilogy, thereby making her the first author of any race or gender to win SF's most prestigious award three times in a row (Wingfield; Schaub). Clearly, people of all colors do indeed want to see black heroes remaking the world in their own image.

This anthology is designed to introduce readers to Afrofuturism as an aesthetic practice that enables artists to communicate the experience of science, technology, and race across centuries, continents, and cultures. As the accomplishments of directors such as Ryan Coogler and musicians such as Janelle Monáe illustrate, the visual and aural aspects of Afrofuturism impress fans and critics alike and are important aspects of this multigenera-

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1. For further details about RaceFail '09, see "RaceFail '09" on Fanlore.org; for more information about Gamergate see Jay Hathaway's "What Is Gamergate, and Why? An Explainer for Non-Geeks"; and for more details about Puppygate, see the eponymous entry on Fanlore.org.

tional, multimedia artistic experiment. But such powerful artistic statements derive from a much older entertainment medium: the printed word. Indeed, as scholars and artists including both of us have argued, Afrofuturist literary experiments extend back to the writing of eighteenth-century poet Phyllis Wheatley and nineteenth-century abolitionist, soldier, and journalist Martin Delany and continue today with the award-winning SF of Delany, Jemisin, and a host of other authors.[2] This book demonstrates the dynamic nature of literary Afrofuturism with essays that explore representations of science, technology, and race as both an historical and global phenomenon.

Defining Afrofuturism

Although black people have produced science fiction, fantasy, and horror as long as those popular genres have existed, it is only in recent decades that scholars and artists have begun discussing this generic production as part of cohesive aesthetic and social movement. White US cultural critic Mark Dery coined the term "Afrofuturism" in 1993 in a series of interviews with African American writer Samuel Delany, cultural critic Tricia Rose, and writer and musician Greg Tate. As Dery puts it, Afrofuturism is a process of "signification that appropriates images of technology and a prosthetically-enhanced future" to address the concerns that people of color face in contemporary culture ("Black to the Future" 180). In its initial conception, Afrofuturism was an extension of the historical recovery projects that black Atlantic intellectuals have engaged in for well over two hundred years. Toni Morrison explains that such projects demonstrate how the conditions of homelessness and alienation experienced by African slaves and their descendants anticipate what Nietzsche claimed were the founding conditions of modernity (in Gilroy 78). For British-Ghanaian music critic Kodwo Eshun, stories about

2. In her 2000 anthology *Dark Matter*, Sheree R. Thomas claimed nineteenth-century author Charles W. Chesnutt, turn-of-the-century sociologist W. E. B. Du Bois, and early twentieth-century journalist George Schuyler as pioneering Afrofuturists; more recently, in her "Crash Course in the History of Black Science Fiction," Nisi Shawl added nineteenth- and early twentieth-century authors Martin R. Delany and Pauline Hopkins to this list. In a similar vein, a number of scholars have also looked backward to map a history of Afrofuturism that is as old as SF itself. Key works in this tradition include Mark Bould's "Revolutionary African American SF before Black Power SF"; Isiah Lavender's *Afrofuturism Rising: The Literary Prehistory of a Movement*; Adrienne Brown and Britt Rusert's "Introduction to 'The Princess Steel'"; and Lisa Yaszek's "An Afrofuturist Reading of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*," "Afrofuturism, Science Fiction, and the History of the Future," and "The Bannekerade: Genius, Madness, and Magic in Black Science Fiction."

"travel through time and space" and "encounters with the alien other" are an ideal way to bring Afrodiasporic historical experiences to life for new audiences. Indeed, riffing on the great sociologist—and SF author—W. E. B. Du Bois, Eshun proposes that SF is a way to double, triple, and even quadruple our collective consciousness about the range of race relations that might exist in the future—and the range of futures those relations might engender (298).

African American sociologist Alondra Nelson made Afrofuturism increasingly central to both aesthetic and critical thinking with the creation of the first Afrofuturist online community in 1998 and the publication of the first scholarly collection on the subject in a 2002 issue of the journal *Social Text*. Much like Dery, Nelson treated Afrofuturism as a primarily literary and artistic movement characterized by "African American voices" with "other stories to tell about culture, technology, and things to come" grounded in the historic experiences of black individuals and communities (9). For Nelson, this project is especially important for African Americans whose stories have long been marginalized and erased in dominant histories of science, technology, and culture. But this erasure was particularly so at the turn of the millennium when new information and communication technologies such as computers and the development of the World Wide Web prompted cybertheorists and advertisers alike to develop a rhetoric of "the digital divide." Such rhetoric posited that new cybertechnologies would either utopically liberate humans from racially marked physical bodies or dystopically exacerbate inequality between white and black people. With its emphasis on extrapolating from past and present Afrodiasporic engagements with science and technology, Afrofuturism provided a strong antidote to prevailing assumptions that "racial identity, and blackness in particular, is the anti-avatar of digital life" (Nelson 1).

Today, the concept of Afrofuturism is very much a part of everyday culture, as illustrated by the commercial success of Ytasha L. Womack's 2013 *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci- Fi and Fantasy Culture* (which ranks #22 on Amazon.com's Kindle list of most popular SF criticism) and the 1.3 million results that come up in Google searches of the term. But the rise of social media and Web 2.0, coupled with an explosion of speculative art production by people of color across the globe, have led artists and scholars to update their ideas about Afrofuturism. One of the most immediate responses to these shifting technocultural landscapes has been to recognize Afrofuturism as one possible mode of storytelling in a much larger tradition of black speculative fiction. For instance, African American SF writer Nisi Shawl places classic Afrofuturist texts including Martin R. Delany's *Blake, Or the Huts*

of America (1859) and Octavia E. Butler's *Kindred* (1979) in a larger history of "Black Science Fiction." For Shawl, "black science fiction" is a term that also includes black fantasy because "access to the scientific knowledge from which SF often derives has been denied to people of the African diaspora for much of history. And the classification of what is and is not scientific knowledge hasn't been under our control—it's frequently a matter of dispute" ("Crash Course"). In a similar vein, African American artist John Jennings and critic Reynaldo Anderson cast Afrofuturism as part of a larger Black Speculative Arts Movement that includes "Afrofuturism, Astro Blackness, Afro-Surrealism, Ethno Gothic, Black Digital Humanities, Black (Afro-future female or African Centered) Science Fiction, The Black Fantastic, and The Esoteric," all of which "overlap around the terms speculative and design; and interact around the nexus of technology and ethics" (*Black Speculative Arts Movement*).

Even as they position Afrofuturism within larger aesthetic movements, artists and scholars also nuance the term itself. Based on conversations with Alondra Nelson at Emory University's 2013 Alien Bodies Conference, Anderson coined the term "Afrofuturism 2.0" to "identify the twenty-first century contemporary expressions of Afrofuturism" that are found not just in literature and art, but that are also "emerging in the areas of metaphysics, speculative philosophy, religion, visual studies, performance, art, and philosophy of science and technology" (*Afrofuturism 2.0* ix). That same year, African American multimedia artist Martine Syms introduced the concept of "Mundane Afrofuturism." Much like Canadian author Geoff Ryman's 2004 "Mundane Science Fiction Manifesto," Syms's own work calls for SF that rejects the adolescent desire to run away from the world and its problems—often through scientifically implausible and worn-out tropes such as faster-than-light travel—and that instead focuses on the future of planet Earth as it might be changed by the sciences and technologies we already have.[3] Additionally, she argues, producers of black speculative fiction must avoid indulging in these exhausted concepts, including everything from "jive-talking aliens" and "white slavery" to "heavy-handed allusions to double-consciousness" and "Egyptian mythology and iconography" ("Mundane"). Instead, Syms recommends that Mundane Afrofuturists embrace "the possibilities of a new focus on black humanity: our science, technology, culture, politics, religions, individuality, needs, dreams, hopes, and failings" ("Mundane").

3. The text of Ryman's "Mundane Science Fiction Manifesto" is available on the *SFGenics* Wordpress page. For further information about the controversy it provoked within the SF community, see Ritch Calvin's article "Mundane SF 101."

The term "Afrofuturism" is particularly complex for first-generation Afrodiasporic artists who retain close ties to their African countries of origin. For example, while Nigerian American Deji Bryce Olukotun accepts the term as an important way to understand his fiction, he argues that Western white and black writers alike have historically played fast and loose with African art and mythology in ways that are often unrecognizable to Africans themselves.[4] Accordingly, it is the job of the contemporary black SF author to produce more nuanced representations of Africa: "We've come a long way since the days of Alan Quartermain slashing through the jungle, and it's been nearly 40 years since the release of Michael Crichton's *Congo*. . . . [The challenge now] is to craft an adventure story that embraces Africa in its 21st century complexity" (Olukotun, "Imagining the Future of Nigeria"). Other writers, however, generate new terms to solve this dilemma. Nigerian American author Nnedi Okorafor rejects descriptions of her work as Afrofuturist, using instead "Africanfuturism" and "Africanjujuism." As Okorafor puts it, these new terms more appropriately describe speculative fiction in which real African traditions are "woven in seamlessly with that which is made up" (@Nnedi Okorafor PhD). In a similar vein, Kenyan Canadian writer Minister Faust describes his own fiction, which draws inspiration from various ancient African civilizations to imagine futures where people of color struggle for justice, as "Imhotep-hop," because "I wanted something that would illustrate the attempt to connect the past with the future [and] Imhotep [the late twenty-seventh-century BCE chancellor to the Egyptian pharaoh Djoser] was the first recorded multi-genius in history" ("Afrofuturism"). For Faust, such terms are important because they distinguish between "Afrocentric" and "Africentric" speculative fiction: while the former describes stories engaging the Afrodiasporic experience of historical African Americans, the latter describes art with an African-focused context.[5]

Of course, black intellectuals descended from African slaves, and other black people who have lived in the West for generations also generate alternatives to the term Afrofuturism. Balogun Ojetade and Milton Davis are recognized leaders in the field of "Steamfunk," which Ojetade describes as a "style of writing and visual aesthetic that combines the African and/or African American culture and approach to life with that of the steampunk philosophy" in order to expose the "issues of racism, sexism, classism, colonialism, and imperialism" that are often erased in mainstream stories of

4. On his webpage *Returnofthedeji*, Olukotun uses "Afrofuturism" to tag posts about both American and African SF, including a post about his own fiction called "Major Film Company Options *After the Flare* and *Nigerians in Space*."

5. See Faust's contribution to the author roundtable in this volume for more details.

nineteenth-century Victorian England and the American Wild West ("What Is Steamfunk?"). In a similar vein, Charles R. Saunders is celebrated as the founder of "Sword and Soul Fantasy" or "heroic fiction/sword and sorcery/epic fiction based on African culture, traditions, and mythology" (K. Wright). Elsewhere, artists Camae Ayewa and Rasheedah Phillips use "Black Quantum Futurism" to describe creative projects inspired by "quantum physics and Black/African cultural traditions of consciousness, time and space" that explore "personal, cultural, familial, and communal cycles of experience [while] transforming negative cycles into positive ones" (Ayewa and Phillips). Taken together, these various kinds of black aesthetic production engender what Reynaldo Anderson calls "Astro-Blackness" or a "black identity framework" that emerges from "global technocultural assemblages, migration, human reproduction, algorithms, digital networks, software platforms, [and] bio-technical augmentation" (*Afrofuturism 2.0*). Even as they generate new and more precise terms to describe specific kinds of artistic and critical practice, then, black artists and scholars remain committed to the initial Afrofuturist project of reorganizing time and space in their work to challenge whitewashed narratives of history and imagine futures in full color.[6]

While we retain the original term "Afrofuturism" in this book, we define it in much the same way as other twenty-first-century intellectuals including Anderson and Syms. Afrofuturism represents a multigenerational, multigenre aesthetic and social movement that responds to/engages social media and Web 2.0, and that includes black authors stretching back to the beginning of modernity and spanning the entire globe.

Exploring Afrofuturism

Whether they call it Afrofuturism or something else, scholars and artists have long been interested in the meaning and value of black speculation. Leading SF journals *Extrapolation* and *Science Fiction Studies* have featured essays about black authors since their inceptions in 1959 and 1973, respec-

6. Significantly, many of the same artists and scholars who have generated new terms to describe speculative black art production still recognize a relationship between the terms they have created and Afrofuturism. For example, the *Black Quantum Futurism* Tumblr page positions its eponymous subject matter as "an evolution, or perhaps further exploration, of that term [Afrofuturism]" (*Black Quantum Futurism*). Meanwhile, Anderson casts Astro-Blackness as "an Afrofuturistic concept" (*Afrofuturism 2.0*). Whether or not they employ the term regularly, then, Afrofuturism remains an important touchstone in ongoing conversations about black speculative fiction.

tively, and as early as the summer of 1984, *Black American Literature Forum* devoted an entire special issue to the subject of race in SF. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, however, there was little discussion of this fiction as a literary form with its own distinct themes, techniques, and relations to other kinds of black cultural production. This situation changed in the 1990s and early 2000s, when critics including Mark Dery, Kodwo Eshun, and Alondra Nelson began to map out the centrality of SF themes and techniques to Afro-diasporic artists. This period also saw the publication of the first black speculative fiction anthologies, most notably Sheree R. Thomas's *Dark Matter: A Century of Speculative Fiction from the African Diaspora* (2000) and *Dark Matter: Reading the Bones* (2004), which introduced readers to speculative stories by African American artists ranging from turn-of-the-century authors Charles W. Chesnutt and W. E. B. DuBois to contemporary writers Nisi Shawl and Kini Iburra Salaam. Meanwhile, Nalo Hopkinson's *Whispers from the Cotton Tree Root: Caribbean Fabulist Fiction* (2000) demonstrated the more global dimensions of Afrofuturism with stories by well-known Caribbean authors Jamaica Kincaid and Wilson Harris as well as tales from newcomers Tobias S. Buckell and Marcia Douglas. Taken together, these literary anthologies demonstrated how Afrofuturism manifests itself through time and space, thereby expanding Dery's initial conception of this aesthetic movement as a uniquely North American and postwar phenomenon.

Given the centrality of SF tropes and narrative techniques to classic definitions of Afrofuturism, it is no surprise that SF scholars were amongst the first to produce book-length studies of this phenomenon. Inspired by Dery's vision of a future-oriented black aesthetic practice as well as the proliferation of award-winning anthologies featuring speculative fiction by artists of color, groundbreaking studies including Elisabeth A. Leonard's *Into Darkness Peering: Race and Color in the Fantastic* (1997), DeWitt Douglas Kilgore's *Astrofuturism: Science, Race, and Visions of Utopia in Space* (2003), Sandra M. Grayson's *Visions of the Third Millennium: Black Science Fiction Novelists Write the Future* (2003), and Marleen S. Barr's *Afro-Future Females: Black Writers Chart Science Fiction's Newest New-Wave Trajectory* (2008) demonstrated the affordances and limitations of genre fiction—especially in its printed form—as a vehicle for imagining brave new futures in full color. Today, some of the best new investigations of literary Afrofuturism come from experts in black studies, including Esther L. Jones's *Medicine and Ethics in Black Women's Speculative Fiction* (2015) and Sami Schalk's *Bodyminds Reimagined: (Dis)ability, Race, and Gender in Black Women's Speculative Fiction* (2018). Considered together, these works emphasize the centrality of print fiction to the Afrofuturist project.

Over the past decade Afrofuturist scholarship has grown well beyond its initial mandate. While literary scholars continue to explore contemporary black artists in light of Dery's initial definition, they often do so from the new vantage points afforded by digitally enabled research and publishing practices. For instance, increased access to the archives of prominent African American artists have led scholars to rethink the role of scientific research in Octavia E. Butler's socially oriented SF, while the recent discovery of W. E. B. DuBois's turn-of-the-century science fantasy "The Princess Steel" (ca. 1908–1910) gestures toward the rich history of African American authors who have long used genre fiction to convey challenging political ideas to readers. Meanwhile, phenomenon including Ghanaian writer Jonathan Dotse's 2012 "Five Continent" science fiction event in Second Life and the publication of pan-African SF anthologies including Ivor W. Hartmann's *AfroSF* series (2012–present) and Nerine Dorman's *Terra Incognita* (2015) ask us if, when, and how it might be productive to consider Afrofuturism as a globe-spanning tapestry of creative voices and aesthetic practices linking historic African American, contemporary black Atlantic, and pan-African authors together in provocative new ways.

This anthology extends the work of its predecessors. Like Grayson, Barr, and Schalk, the authors featured here are interested in both established and new Afrofuturist authors. In the past decade there has been a veritable explosion of SF by authors of color, many of whom are not historic African Americans but first-generation immigrants who claim both America and other countries as home and who bring different concerns and different dreams to their chosen genre. Accordingly, authors in this volume pay homage to the richness of Afrofuturism with essays celebrating key figures associated with this literary movement and recovering those who have been lost to SF history. They also call attention to the new generation of authors who are currently revising, updating, and otherwise extending the Afrofuturist agenda in both the United States and abroad. Finally, the scholars featured in these pages explore if, how, and when African SF might be considered part of Afrofuturism. As such, our anthology sheds light on the complex ways artists of color stake claims for themselves in the global future imaginary.

Literary Afrofuturism in the Twenty-First Century also comprises a timely intervention into current critical conversations about speculative art by people of color. Not surprisingly, the rise of Web 2.0 and the increasing availability of affordable digital communication tools in recent years have encouraged scholars to turn their attention to Afrofuturism as it is expressed across media. In particular, works such as Adilifu Nama's *Black Space: Imagining Race in Science Fiction Film* (2008), Sandra Jackson and Julie E. Moody-

Freeman's *The Black Imagination: Science Fiction, Futurism, and the Speculative* (2011), Ytasha L. Womack's *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture* (2013), Reynaldo Anderson's and Charles E. Jones's *Afrofuturism 2.0: The Rise of Astro-Blackness* (2015), and André Carrington's *Speculative Blackness: The Future of Race in Science Fiction* (2016) have been crucial for understanding the significance of Afrofuturism in media including film, comic books, and digital art.

While the impact of media Afrofuturism cannot be underestimated, this collection reminds readers that the printed word remains an important lens through which to understand the full dimensions of Afrofuturism. Building upon the work of their predecessors, the authors featured here provide protocols for reading Afrofuturism in the twenty-first century, especially as it expresses itself in black-oriented SF, fantasy, and comics. Taken together, they push generic boundaries; recover lost artists and introduce new ones; map the connections between black art, the environment, and public policy; connect the revival of old hate-based politics with the increasing visibility of imagined futures in full color; and explore how the seemingly meteoric rise of a new, pan-African speculative literary tradition may or may not connect with Afrofuturism under the umbrella of "black SF." Their essays are grouped into four conversations—about contemporary aesthetics, literary history, cultural history, and the relations of Afrofuturism and Africa—that are central to discussions of black speculative art in the current moment. All four of these conversations are framed by an introductory roundtable in which artists from around the globe exchange their own ideas about the promises and perils of Afrofuturism and an essay in which pioneering author and editor Sheree R. Thomas explores how black women are leading new developments in Afrofuturism today. Additionally, each conversation begins with original artwork by acclaimed artist Stacey Robinson, whose visual interpretation of the topic at hand orients—and reorients—readers to the issues considered therein.

Literary Afrofuturism in the Twenty-First Century: Section and Chapter Overview

Part One: Afrofuturism Now. While most of *Literary Afrofuturism in the Twenty-First Century* is dedicated to scholarly inquiry, we open this anthology with two pieces that explore the meaning and value of Afrofuturism from the perspective of fiction writers and editors themselves. The first, "An Author Roundtable on Afrofuturism," features