



AFROFUTURISM 2.0 & THE BLACK SPECULATIVE ART MOVEMENT

Notes on a Manifesto

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Over the last decade, an embryonic movement examining the overlap between race, art, science and design has been stirring and growing beneath the surface. Afrofuturism is the current name for a body of systematic Black speculative thought originating in the 1990s as a response to postmodernity that has blossomed into a global movement the last five years. Although contemporary Black speculative thought has *roots* at the nexus of 19th century scientific racism, technology, and the struggle for African self-determination and creative expression, it has now matured into an emerging global phenomenon. Afrofuturism 2.0 is the beginning of both a move away and an answer to the Eurocentric perspective of the 20th century's early formulation of Afrofuturism that wondered if the history of African peoples, especially in North America, had been deliberately erased. Or to put it more plainly, future-looking Black scholars, artists, and activists are not only reclaiming their right to tell their own stories, but also to critique the European/American digerati class of their narratives about cultural others, past, present and future and, challenging their presumed authority to be the sole interpreters of Black lives and Black futures. Kodwo Eshun asserts: "Afrofuturism may be characterized as a program for recovering the histories of counter-futures created in a century hostile to Afrodiasporic projection and as a space within which the critical work of manufacturing tools capable of intervention within the current political dispensation may be undertaken" (288). One example of several approaches within this current wave of Afrofuturism is the strategic formulation reflecting *Afrofuturism is a critical project with the mission of laying*

the groundwork for a humanity that is not bound up with the ideals of white Enlightenment universalism, critical theory, science or technology (Jones, 2015, Rabaka, 2010, Rollefson, 2008, p. 91). More recently, according to Anderson and Jones:

[C]ontemporary expressions of Afrofuturism emerging in the areas of metaphysics, speculative philosophy, religion, visual studies, performance, art and philosophy of science or technology that are described as “2.0,” in response to the emergence of social media and other technological advances since the middle of the last decade. (ix)

Additionally, the authors define Afrofuturism 2.0 as:

[T]he early twenty-first century technogenesis of Black identity reflecting counter histories, hacking and or appropriating the influence of network software, database logic, cultural analytics, deep remixability, neurosciences, enhancement and augmentation, gender fluidity, posthuman possibility, the speculative sphere, with transdisciplinary applications and has grown into an important Diasporic techno-cultural Pan African movement. (x)

Therefore, propelled by new thoughts and creative energy, members of this Black speculative movement have been in creative dialogue with the boundary of space-time, the exterior of the macro-cosmos and the interior of the micro-cosmos. Yet, there is historical precedent for this movement around the concepts of the color line, the color curtain, and the digital divide. In 1903, W. E. B. Du Bois published his great work, *The Souls of Black Folk*, drawing on the disciplines of sociology, anthropology, autobiography, and history, and made his argument in the era of Jim Crow and imperialism noting: “The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color-line, the relation of the darker races of men in Asia and Africa, in America and the islands of the sea” (18). Furthermore, Du Bois suggested, due to their unique experience, African Americans had developed a metaphysical perspective or “Veil” that bestowed a certain insight upon them on life in the West. The Veil was a literary and philosophical translation of the inner life of people of African descent in the Americas (Du Bois, *Souls of Black Folk*). Two years later, in 1905, Albert Einstein proposed his Special Theory of Relativity that confirmed the relationship between space and time, postulating

that the laws of physics are invariant in all inertial systems and the speed of light in a vacuum is the same for all observers. Between 1908 and 1910, Du Bois drew upon ideas from natural science, humanities and social science to write a speculative short fiction story, “The Princess Steel.” Du Bois developed this story with a character that invented a Mega-scope that could see across space and time that would amplify his ideas to study the boundary of space-time creatively, “into a means for perceiving material history” (Du Bois, Brown & Rusert 820). The creative ideas of Du Bois and others during this period would be decisive in aesthetic and socio-political formulations of the non-white world of the twentieth century. Later in the twentieth century, Indonesian president Achmed Sukarno and other leaders organized the Bandung conference, a meeting for the Dark World that called for the de-occidentalization of the earth. Kwame Nkrumah, the foremost African leader to promote Pan-Africanism in the post-World War II era was an ardent supporter of this 1955 conference. Author Richard Wright, a conference attendee, reported on the ideas promoted, and discussed them at length in his work *The Color Curtain* (1956). This event would influence the imagination of activists like Claudia Jones, Malcolm X, Steve Biko, Thomas Sankara, and others, in pursuit of the liberation of the Dark World.

Over the course of a generation, many of these radical initiatives would be repressed or betrayed. However, the seeds for a Black speculative movement challenging white racist normativity and Black parochialism, would be sown by creative intellectuals, mystics, and artists like Sun Ra, Fela Kuti, George Clinton, Max Beauvoir, Octavia E. Butler, John Coltrane, Alice Coltrane, Samuel R. Delany, Jimi Hendrix, Jean Michel Basquiat, and many others. At the end of the twentieth century, scholars such as Molefi Kete Asante, Audre Lorde, Chinua Achebe, Ngugiwa Thiong’o, Greg Tate, bell hooks, and Cornel West catalogued the increasing deterioration and anomie of Black cultural production and dislocation in relation to the transition to a neoliberal, multi-national, political-economic matrix. Furthermore, Anna Everett, Alondra Nelson, Paul D. Miller, Alex Weheliye, Kali Tal, and others, via an online forum during the early conceptual development of Afro-futurism, analyzed an emerging global digital divide that reflected technical, economic, and social inequality. This phenomenon was primarily

responsible for the interruption of Africa, its Diaspora, and other countries of the global south in attaining optimal growth or enhancement in political, economic, social, or cultural capital. On the other side of the Atlantic, work by Kodwo Eshun as a member the Cybernetic Culture Research Unit (CCRU), and John Akomfrah, co-founder of the Black Audio Film collective, were crucial to the global theoretical genesis of Black cyber-culture. However, during this time and into the early 21st century, several disparate strands of a new creative Africanist matrix emerged, influenced by speculative design and world building, as well as a renewed radicalized socio-political stance, and the social physics of Blackness (the interface of African peoples, myth-forms, technology, behavioral science, ethics, and social world). Indispensable to this manifesto is the groundbreaking work done on the Black speculative phenomenon by Sheree Renée Thomas. In the late 90s, in a hostile environment toward Black speculative work, Thomas gathered obscure documents with the support of interviews from Octavia Butler, Amiri Baraka, Charles Saunders, Samuel R. Delany, and Delany's then-wife Marilyn Hacker (Thomas). Furthermore, these interviews and information gave Thomas the insight to revisit the term "speculative fiction" and create a project that led to the genesis of her anthology *Dark Matter: A Century of Speculative Fiction from the African Diaspora* in 2000 and *Dark Matter: Reading the Bones* in 2004 (Thomas).

This manifesto assembles and recognizes the ideas developed between 2005 and 2015 as the inspiration for the Black Speculative Art Movement (BSAM) and the event *Unveiling Visions: The Alchemy of The Black Imagination* that established its existence. Black speculative art is a creative, aesthetic practice that integrates African diasporic or African metaphysics with science or technology and seeks to interpret, engage, design, or alter reality for the re-imagination of the past, the contested present, and as a catalyst for the future. Moreover, this manifesto explores the question, "What is the responsibility of the Black artist in the 21st century?" Within the Afrofuturist 2.0 frame of inquiry, Tiffany Barber asserts:

What is compelling about Afrofuturism is that it is historical in its gesture back to previous debates about social responsibility, radical politics, and black artistic production that surged during the

Black Arts Movement or BAM of the 60s and 70s. But it rearticulates these debates and expands our understandings of blackness's multi-dimensionality, the good and the bad, the respectable and the undesirable.

Afrofuturism 2.0 and the Black Speculative Arts Movement are indebted to previous movements like BAM, Negritude, The Harlem Renaissance, and other continental and diasporic African speculative movements. Moreover, it is a continuation of the historical behavior within the Veil to engage the philosophies of thinkers such as Du Bois, Wright, Everett, and others in piercing the Color Line, the Color Curtain, and understanding the digital divide in the face of similarly relevant 21st-century challenges. For example, contemporary artists like Kapwani Kiwanga are revisiting the ideas of Kwame Nkrumah to envision an Afro-Galactic future. Moreover, the goals of the BSAM manifesto are structured as a pursuit or open-sourced path of inquiry to transform the anomie or collapse in ethics and dystopia in the Diaspora and African communities that were displaced by the collapse of space-time.

Several events between 2005 and 2015 shaped the development of BSAM, including the explosion in social media platforms illustrated by Facebook, Youtube, and Twitter (Van Dijck, 2013), and three seminal publications: *The Big Short* (Lewis) documenting the global market collapse, Bill Bishop's *The Big Sort*, detailing re-segregation of people; and Michelle Alexander's *The New Jim Crow*. Tributary events were the election of the United States' first African American president, Barack Obama, racist reactions and subsequent collapse of the liberal post-racial project, the increased use of crowdfunding and other new technologies to design creative projects, escalating environmental stress, and the New Scramble for Africa (Kimeyi & Zenia). Furthermore, the resurgence of Pan Africanism and outreach to the African Diaspora (now incorporated as the 6th zone) by the African Union; the appearance of state sanctioned deaths of Black people through police brutality, such as the Marikana massacre; and the current global Black social protest response to localized forms of injustice all intensified the current social context. BSAM is not a unified school of thought. BSAM is a loose umbrella term which represents different positions or basis of inquiry: Afrofuturism 2.0 (and its several Africanist manifestations, e.g.

Black Quantum Futurism, African Futurism, Afrofuturismo, and Afro-futurista), Astro Blackness, Afro-Surrealism, Afro-Pessimism, Ethno Gothic, Black Digital Humanities, Black (Afro-future female or African centered) Science Fiction, The Black Fantastic, Magical Realism, and The Esoteric. Although these positions may be incompatible in some instances, they overlap around the term *speculative* and *design*, and interact around the nexus of technology and ethics. Individuals or organizations whose work represents pillars of BSAM would include and are not limited to: Martin Delany, Paschal B. Randolph, Toni Morrison, Sun Ra, Amiri Baraka, Tananarive Due, Ben Okri, Nnedi Okorafor, W. E. B. Du Bois, The Afrofuturist Affair, Samuel R. Delany, Minister Faust, Jean-Pierre Bekolo, Jarita Holbrook, Milton Davis, Ishmael Reed, Wanuri Kahiu, Sheree Renée Thomas, Andrea Hairston, Janelle Monae, Sanford Biggers, John Jennings, Octavia E. Butler, *Octavia's Brood*, Nalo Hopkinson, Cyrus Kabiru, D. Scott Miller, Pamela Phatsimo Sunstrum, Steven Barnes, N.K. Jemison, D. Denenge Akpem, Ytasha Womack, Kapwani Kiwanga, John Akomfrah, and Kodwo Eshun.

In the occidental realm, the epistemic boundaries of speculative design is limited largely to objects, how they mediate the human experience and are primarily interpreted through ideas originating with the Frankfurt school of critical theory (a body of thought usually dismissive, in the case of Theodor Adorno, silent or Eurocentric in regards to Black cultural knowledge production and performance). Furthermore, this occidental approach limits the framework of the speculative to Western philosophy and science. For example, Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby argue that, in relation to speculative design, only the present, probable, preferable, plausible, and possible should be zones of concern, noting:

Beyond this lies the zone of fantasy, an area we have little interest in. Fantasy exists in its own world, with few if any links to the world we live in... This is the world of fairy tales, goblins, superheroes, and space opera. (4)

However, this approach eschews or avoids alternative speculative cultural worldviews and attempts to establish a system where Europe assumes the teacher position with all others as the recipients and consequently users of this limited perspective. For example, there is historical evidence that demonstrates, via the route of alchemy, that magic is a

gateway into the study of science. In contrast to Dunn and Raby, Lewis Mumford (*Technics and Civilization*) previously noted:

Between fantasy and exact knowledge, between drama and technology, there is an intermediate station: that of magic. It was in magic that the general conquest of the external environment was decisively instituted. For the magicians not only believed in marvels but audaciously sought to work them: by their straining after the exceptional, the natural philosophers who followed them were first given a clue to the regular. (36–37)

An Africanist example of this phenomenon is the work of Max Beauvoir, a trained biochemist and Voodoo priest who synthesized these approaches in medical treatments, as a healer and activist. Digital scientist Nettrice Gaskins, building on and moving beyond previous work done by Ron Eglash with African fractals, along with other contemporary scholars, demonstrates the possibilities of re-conceptualizing African Cosmograms as cultural tools to interact with digital technology, augmented space and augmented reality. Moreover, there are implications for culturally situated learning, STEAM, and holistic health. Nnedi Okorafor's novel *Akata Witch* reveals the overlap or merger between magic and technology as a case for these implications. Therefore, in contrast to the occidental speculative design approach, BSAM freely embraces the Africanist approach to speculative design and incorporates earthly and unearthly intuitive aspects of Esoterica, Animism, and Magical Realism. This integration generates overlapping zones with other knowledge formations when formulating or conceptualizing theory and practice in relation to material reality.

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NOTES

1. For more information on each of these topics, see José Van Dijck's *The Culture of Connectivity: A Critical History of Social Media* (2013), Michal Lewis's *The Big Short: Inside the Doomsday Machine* (2010), Bill Bishop's *The Big Sort: Why the Clustering of Like-Minded America*

is *Tearing Us Apart* (2008), Michelle Alexander's *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (2010), and Mwangi S. Kimenyi and Zenia Lewis's "The BRICs and the New Scramble for Africa" (2011).

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