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25 Years of Afrofuturism and Black Speculative Thought: Roundtable with Tiffany E. Barber, Reynaldo Anderson, Mark Dery, and Sheree Renée Thomas

Introduction and Transcription by Tiffany E. Barber

Afrofuturism is an aesthetic and political mode of contemporary black expression that has gained considerable currency in popular and academic discourse since its introduction in the early 1990s. Cultural critic Mark Dery first used the term in his oft-cited essay “Black to the Future” to describe “speculative fiction that treats African-American themes and addresses African-American concerns in the context of twentieth-century technoculture—and, more generally, African-American signification that appropriates images of technology and a prosthetically enhanced future” (1994, 180).¹ Dery’s notion of Afrofuturism engendered a troubling anti-mony considering that a shared black past has been “deliberately rubbed out,” giving rise to an inexhaustible yet exhausting search for evidence to redress the trauma of this loss (180). Given this devastation, is the imagination of (black) futures possible? Furthermore, he asks, “Isn’t the unreal estate of the future already owned by the technocrats, futurologists, streamliners, and set designers...who have engineered our collective fantasies?” (180).

The assumption of a mutually beneficial relationship between racial and technological progress has inspired problematic visions of raceless, placeless, genderless and bodiless futures. Imaginings of race-free futures, or worlds in which racial difference no longer matter, abound in the predominantly white genres of science fiction literature and film. Considered a form of redress to these discursive currents,

Afrofuturism combines science fiction elements to imagine alternate worlds with regard to racial politics and belonging. In so doing, it is seen as a way to make sense of the past and its relevance to our black political present.

Within Afrofuturism, the realities of captive slavery and forced diaspora are likened to the instances of bodily transformation and alien invasion that appear in science and speculative fiction novels and films. Robots, cyborgs and androids as well as interstellar adventures and time travel all feature prominently in the otherworldly, intergalactic narratives at the core of Afrofuturist visual, literary and sonic texts. Afrofuturist works also aim to subvert science fiction tropes to highlight and complicate issues of racial difference and representations of blackness that are often left out of generic plots or eclipsed altogether. These issues and representations include the structured absence and token presence of black characters and actors, themes of racial contamination and racial paranoia as constitutive of a postapocalyptic future, and the traumatized black body as the ultimate signifier of difference, alien-ness and otherness.

In select writings by scholars such as Alondra Nelson, Kodwo Eshun, Nettrice Gaskins and Ruth Mayer, Afrofuturism is a revisionist discourse in which racialized, gendered bodies use technology to reparative ends—an ethos of “cosmic liberation” and “possibility in a world meant to destroy any and all forms of black life,” as Shanté Paradigm Smalls puts it² (see also Mayer 2000; Eshun 2003). But Afrofuturism is about more than reclaiming the past, according to Lisa Yaszek; it is “about reclaiming the history of the future as well” (2005, 300). As the term has become more mainstream, scholars and authors have looked to the canon of African American letters to extend Afrofuturism’s purview. Sheree Renée Thomas’s two World Fantasy Award-winning *Dark Matter* anthologies (2000; 2004) position famed sociologist W.E.B. Du Bois as a speculative fiction writer—a novel intervention—by putting his short story, “The Comet,” in conversation with other black speculative fiction pioneers and their writing. In the time since the two volumes were published (the second volume from 2004 included a second speculative work of Du Bois), a third story was discovered in Du Bois’ archives. Over the past 7 years, a new wave of scholarship and critical sensibilities about Afrofuturism have emerged, troubling well-worn visual and literary tropes such as magical or mutant black characters, and interstellar travel and outer space as the ideal routes to liberation. Reynaldo Anderson and Charles E. Jones define this 2.0 version of Afrofuturism as “the early twenty-first century technogenesis of Black identity reflecting counter histories, hacking [and] 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 [that] has grown into an important Diasporic techno-cultural Pan African movement” (2016, x; see also Anderson, “Afrofuturism 2.0 and the Black Speculative Arts Movement”).

Mark Dery, Reynaldo Anderson, Sheree Renée Thomas, and I gathered at the Black Speculative Arts Movement convened at the Bronx Museum of the Arts in

New York on April 22, 2017, to discuss the evolution of Afrofuturism and black speculative thought more broadly. Below is an edited transcript of that roundtable discussion.



Tiffany Barber [TB]: Since all of you are currently historicizing the work and making interventions that will then be taken up in scholarship for years to come, let's trace the iterations of Afrofuturism since its inception in the early to mid-1990s and think about the past, present, and future of the term and movement. What is Afrofuturism? What are its defining features, its characteristics?

Reynaldo Anderson [RA]: In the spirit of this panel's title, I'll start with the past. To locate Afrofuturism's early formations, you have to look at a bracket of time, from 1987 to '92 or '93. In "The Race for Theory" [1987], Barbara Christian talks about how, from her perspective as a black feminist cultural critic, people of colour lacked access to what was becoming popular with regard to technology at the time. She also asserts that there was a lacuna in terms of black scholarly perspectives engaging with this era of historical change. During the 5-year period from '87 to '92, the Cold War ends and people are using desktop computers more and more; there are Skypagers, the "golden age of hip-hop" is dawning, Donna J. Haraway's "A Cyborg Manifesto" [1985] and Molefi Asante's *The Afrocentric Idea* [1987] appear. This was clearly a cultural shift, what I call a fragmentation, or disaggregation of knowledge, and people were racing to come up with ways to describe what was happening.

I think what Mark [Dery] was trying to do with the term "Afrofuturism" was explain the contemporary intersection between race, technology, and art production. Now, in "Black American Speculative Literature: A Checklist" [1975], John Pfeiffer claims that science fiction and black speculative thought have been intertwined since roughly the 19th century. In other words, to be unfree and write about freedom—to imagine a utopia where black folks are free from bondage—*was* science fiction, it was speculative thought, even though it wasn't necessarily canonized or characterized as such. Science fiction itself has been seen as a literary subgenre, as something unworthy of scholarly investigation. And I've argued that Martin Delany's *Blake; or, The Huts of America* [1859–1862; reprinted 1970] is the first major breakthrough in the black speculative tradition, and Phillis Wheatley's poetry, which precedes Delany's text, could be considered the speculative-sacred. Furthermore, W. E. B. Du Bois' *The Souls of Black Folk* [1903] outlines the postmodern black experience and the cultural disorientation of being a black person of the African Diaspora in the West. As far as the first wave of Afrofuturist scholarship goes, I look to Mark [Dery's] *Flame Wars*, Mark Sinker's essay "Loving the Alien," on Sun Ra and Public Enemy, Kodwo Eshun's *More Brilliant Than the Sun* [1998], and the "Afrofuturism" special issue of *Social Text* [2002], edited by Alondra Nelson. Closely following is Eshun's "Further Considerations of Afrofuturism" [2003], and

Paul D. Miller's *Rhythm Science* [2004] and *The Book of Ice* [2011]—all of which introduce core philosophical engagements with black futurity. Two special Afrofuturism issues also come to mind, Mark Bould and Rone Shavers' 2007 issue of *Science Fiction Studies* and tobias c. van Veen's 2013 issue of *Dancecult: Journal of Electronic Dance Music Culture*.³

Mark Dery [MD]: The term “Afrofuturism” emerges at a moment when cyberpunk is romanticizing the *bricoleur*. In *Neuromancer* [1984], for instance, William Gibson says the street finds its own uses for things. But he uses “street” in this very white sense; there's no sense of the historical synonymizing of street with black urban culture in his writing. So, he's romanticizing punk roboticists and hackers who are presumed to be white. At the same time, popular culture magazines such as *WIRED*, *Mondo 2000*, the early bulletin board system, and others were seen to be steering the conversation concerning digital culture in the US. Again, these publications and their presumed readership were overwhelmingly white and libertarian; they dreamed of sloughing off the corruptible flesh, etherealizing the mind, uploading it into a massively parallel mainframe, and fleeing this burnt hunk of clinker we call Earth for off-world colonies. This was a huge problem. It was a deeply body-phobic vision of futurity and of technology, shot through with a loathing for the corporeal, the feminine, and “the Other.”

Today, there's a deep political heart to Afrofuturism that I worry is getting lost, especially when I see writing about it that begins by defining it as an aesthetic. Aestheticizing is the first step to depoliticizing. Now, I love aesthetics. But aestheticizing politics is the cornerstone of fascism, as Siegfried Kracauer states in *The Mass Ornament* [1927] with regard to the Third Reich, which has never been more popular than it is in our current moment. People shouting “Heil Trump”? You can't make this stuff up! Talk about living in a science fiction reality. So, we have to be mindful of this and push back against the aestheticizing of Afrofuturism.

TB: As an art historian, it's hard for me to hear that aesthetics can't be politics, especially in a conversation at the intersection of race, gender and sexuality. Which is to say, a lot of times black aesthetics *has functioned as* black politics. But I'll leave that alone for now [*laughter*] and keep going with something you said, Sheree, about black joy and black health. What exactly are the black futures we are imagining with Afrofuturism? What is the “afro” in Afrofuturism?

Sheree Renée Thomas [ST]: To answer, I'll read an excerpt of something I wrote for this panel, titled “25 Years in a 400-Year-Long Song”:

We live in a world of ever-evolving technology. Mass communication connects us, theoretically, to every curve of our world. And yet there is increased voicelessness. This supposed silence belies a more sinister, ancient agenda, one that has plagued us through the centuries since the first ships left with stolen lives. A force pursues us relentlessly, like the sharks that follow the scent of our ancestors' blood. There is blood in the water, so much blood and yet the salt and the years [that have passed] have created an illusion. A more

accurate term...would be “erasure.” We create. We create and yet external forces rush to reclaim, rename, reappropriate the culture and the intellectual labour we give birth to. But our art is our sword and our shield. And our art is a vital tool, a mould and form of critical reflection and rejuvenation capable of responding to and addressing the paradox of oppression, and the joys and the wonders of living. That is what art does when [it is] valued, protected, and shared across generations in all of our communities, honouring all of our multiple shared identities. Our art has the power to subvert and resist erasure, to resist silencing, to resist being co-opted for other agendas that have little to do with black love, black joy, black liberation and freedom, health and wholeness. When we determine our way forward, rooted in our own creativity and values, those that would distort and exploit [our creativity and us] become fiercely and transparently uncomfortable with the enterprise.

These oppressive forces aren't interested in black love, black joy, black health. They're interested in the aesthetics of it, and maybe this is a different conversation. “Oh, look at them, they're dancing! They're singing, they're weaving, they're rapping. They're doing all this amazing stuff!” What does that perspective have to do with black futures in terms of our ability to be healthy and whole in this present, not in some theoretical, abstract future, but right now? I'm in a very different place than I was in the 1990s when I was posting on the Afrofuturism.net listserv with Alondra Nelson, Paul D. Miller, Kali Tal, and others. At that time, I was just trying to find my tribe, looking through my father's albums, doing research at the Schomburg Center [for Research in Black Culture]. At this point, I've done the dance, I've sung the songs, I've raised millennials. Now I want to see that art and work being connected actively—consciously—with the political work and the activism I see happening on a grassroots level to address the same oppressive systems we've been facing for centuries. We're on a merry-go-round; all of these so-called renaissances emerge—from Harlem to present—and get suppressed. For me, I want more out of my futurism. I want more [*applause*].

RA: I was so caught up in that! To your last question, Tiffany, at the AstroBlackness conference in Los Angeles a few years ago, I stated, “If there's no Africa in your Afrofuturism, then you're doing somebody else's futurism.” This is a decolonization project, a pan-African project, and it goes beyond literature and aesthetics, which I contend can actually be very political, especially if it's highlighting a gap or a direction where you *should* be looking. It depends on access. As James Baldwin said, “What is the price of [your] ticket?” This is why I emphasize metaphysics, applied science, programmatic spaces, future studies and forecasting, and other themes in my writing. Black speculative work is serious, necessary work. It provides a compass so we—black people—can forecast and *do* what is needed to take care of ourselves, our communities, and our environments.

MD: Absolutely. Let me nuance my position on aesthetics. I well understand that aesthetics can be highly political, and not just when art is agitprop. I also understand

that art is always already politicized; it's steeped in its historical moment, its cultural embeddedness. In my previous comment, I was referring specifically to aesthetics in consumer capitalism because consumer capitalism eviscerates meaning, flays the skin of things, taxidermies them, and resells them to us at Hot Topic as a transgressive lifestyle statement. Then it becomes lockstep rebellion, a trillion nonconformists marching to the same drum. That's what's so pernicious about consumer capitalism.

As for Afrofuturism as a critical enterprise, my conception of the term began with a simple question: "Why do so few African Americans write science fiction?" In "Black to the Future," I sought to sharpen this inquiry because the perceived absence in black SF writers seemed utterly counterintuitive to me. At the time, to the best of my knowledge, Samuel R. Delany, Steve Barnes, Octavia Butler and Charles Saunders were the only African Americans writing SF. But, if I may read from my essay, science fiction is "a genre whose close encounters with the Other—the stranger in a strange land—would seem uniquely suited to the concerns of African American novelists. [The absence of black SF writers] is especially perplexing in light of the fact that African Americans, in a very real sense, are the descendants of alien abductees; they inhabit a sci-fi nightmare in which unseen but no less impassible force fields of intolerance frustrate their movements; official histories undo what has been done; and technology is too often brought to bear on black bodies (branding, forced sterilization, the Tuskegee experiment, and tasers come readily to mind)" [1994, 179–80]. So, it's this idea that stories can be both liberatory and repressive, and culture as a war of narratives is incredibly important. Adopting a science fictional worldview produces philosophical and political insights, especially in our contemporary moment when unfounded facts and fables have real consequences in people's lives.

ST: To that point, when people ask questions about the absence of black sci-fi writers, the answer usually is, "They exist; you just don't know them." In addition to the names Mark listed, Jewelle Gomez was also publishing. Wanda Coleman was also publishing. Ishmael Reed, Amiri Baraka and Henry Dumas were publishing. Charles R. Saunders, Steven Barnes, Mary C. Aldridge. There are so many other writers, and I'm sure they would have been very surprised to learn that they weren't writing science fiction. But they get left out of the conversation because publishing has a system and a politics to it. If you're not being published, are you not writing? If the ten people who decide the 55,000 books that get printed each year in English in this country, who believe there can be only one black [sci-fi] writer at a time, aren't publishing multiple authors, are other authors not writing? Do independent, small presses count? It's technologically easier and cheaper to publish on your own now, and it's not as stigmatized as it was in the 1990s. So, in these conversations, we need to consider the mechanics of these issues and how the mechanics are a part of the erasure of diverse voices. We have to continue to look outside of the canon to find the richness. This is why I love black culture. We're always creating work that exists outside of the mainstream; we're innovative.

TB: My last question builds on Sheree's prompt for us to be more attentive to what is included and excluded. Critiques of Afrofuturism claim it's too narrowly focused on the "African American experience," thereby ignoring the fact that blackness is understood differently across American and African contexts. Alternately, Afrofuturism in recent years has been positioned as a multicultural, transnational project in the context of Latin America, Asia and the Arab world. What are Afrofuturism's limits and possibilities?

RA: Well, first, for students, be careful not to reproduce what you've been erroneously taught, especially in terms of discourses about art and social life. For example, if you want to critique black futurity, you don't need the Frankfurt School to make your argument. The Frankfurt School was antiblack in its formation—

ST: Thank you!

MD: and anti-jazz—

RA: Yes, and this has to do with agency. There is a ton of material within African philosophy, African American philosophy, and Afro-Caribbean philosophy—Sylvia Wynter, W. E. B. Du Bois, even—for theorizing black futures.

Secondly, Afrofuturism is moving beyond its American-centric origins. We are in a neo-nationalist moment. People are disappointed by the ability of the state, especially in terms of the Left and its failed promises with regard to the poor and everyday working-class folks. The Ferguson unrest [in St. Louis, Missouri, after the murder of Michael Brown] underscored this, calling into question the place of racial justice within the sociopolitical imagination. Theory comes from practice in this circumstance, not theory—or art for that matter—for its own sake. So, going forward, we have an opening to reassess our relationship to democratic politics and what we expect to be delivered.

ST: Also, on the continent of Africa, countries and cultures are self-determining what Afrofuturism means for themselves. As already stated, Afrofuturism begins with Africa! And there has been an amazing amount of growth in the past 25 years in terms of literature, film, festivals and independent publishing. I'm struggling to keep up myself!

Notes on the Contributors

TIFFANY E. BARBER is a scholar, curator and writer of 20th- and 21st-century visual art, new media and performance. Her work focuses on artists of the black diaspora working in the United States and the broader Atlantic world. Her scholarly and curatorial projects have centred on Afrofuturism, dark humour and the African American image, contemporary black dance, technology and the self, and black visual culture in the post-civil rights American South. Her writing has appeared in *Black Camera*, *Dance Research Journal*, *CAA Reviews*, *Afterimage: The Journal of Media Arts and Cultural Criticism*, *Beautiful/Decay* and *Art Focus Oklahoma* and various exhibition catalogs, anthologies and online publications. She holds a BFA in Dance from Fordham University/the Ailey School and a PhD in Visual and Cultural Studies from the University of Rochester. In fall 2018, she will join the University of Delaware's Department of Africana Studies as an Assistant Professor.

REYNALDO ANDERSON is Associate Professor of Communications and Chair of the Humanities Department at Harris-Stowe State University, where he has won several awards for teaching and leadership excellence. He is the past Chair of the Black Caucus of the National Communication Association (NCA) and an executive board member of the Missouri Arts Council. He has worked for prison reform with CURE International in Cameroon and as a development ambassador for the Sekyere Afram Plains district library in Ghana. Anderson is currently the executive director and co-founder of the Black Speculative Arts Movement (BSAM), a network of artists, curators, intellectuals and activists. He is co-editor of several publications, including *Afrofuturism 2.0: The Rise of Astro-Blackness*, *Cosmic Underground: A Grimoire of Black Speculative Discontent*, *The Black Speculative Art Movement: Black Futurity, Art+Design*, and “Black Lives, Black Politics, Black Futures,” a special issue of *TOPLA: Canadian Journal of Cultural Studies*.

MARK DERY is a cultural critic who writes about the media, society, visual culture, and American mythologies (and pathologies). He has been a professor of journalism at NYU, an adjunct professor at the Yale School of Art, a Chancellor’s Distinguished Fellow at UC Irvine, a Hertog author in Columbia University’s Hertog Fellowship program, and a Visiting Scholar at the American Academy in Rome. Dery’s books include the essay collection *I Must Not Think Bad Thoughts: Drive-By Essays on American Dread, American Dreams, The Pyrotechnic Insanitarium: American Culture on the Brink, Escape Velocity: Cyberculture at the End of the Century*, and the anthology *Flame Wars*, in which he coined the term “Afrofuturism.” His biography, *Born to Be Posthumous: The Eccentric Life and Mysterious Genius of Edward Gorey*, was published by Little, Brown in 2018.

SHEREE RENÉE THOMAS is an award-winning author and editor born in Memphis, Tennessee. Her widely published stories and poems appear in the *New York Times*, *ESSENCE*, *Apex Magazine*, Harvard’s *Transition*, *Callaloo*, *Strange Horizons*, *Sycorax’s Daughters*, *Memphis Noir*, and *Mojo Rising: Contemporary Writers*. Her collection *Sleeping under the Tree of Life* (Aqueduct Press) was longlisted and named a 2016 James Tiptree, Jr. Award “Worthy” book. Thomas’ *Dark Matter* volumes won two World Fantasy Awards for Year’s Best Anthology (Hachette/Warner Aspect 2001, 2005). Thomas was the first black writer to receive the World Fantasy Award, and in 2017 she was named the first recipient of the L. A. Banks Award for Outstanding Achievement. She is Associate Editor of the peer-reviewed journal *Obsidian: Literature & Arts in the African Diaspora* (Illinois State University, Normal). She is currently editing a new speculative fiction anthology, *Trouble the Waters: Tales from the Deep Blue*, forthcoming from Rosarium.

Notes

1. This essay appears in Dery’s *Flame Wars*, an anthology of the author’s essays, most of which first appeared in the *South Atlantic Quarterly* (see especially Dery 1992).
2. See Smalls’ recent writing on X-Men character Storm, presented at the 2016 Black Portraits conference hosted by New York University in Johannesburg, South Africa. This note comes from her paper description, which can be found here: <http://www.blackportraits.info/speakers/shante-smalls/>. See also Ruth Mayer’s “‘Africa as an Alien Future’: The Middle Passage, Afrofuturism, and Postcolonial Waterworlds” and Kodwo Eshun’s “Further Considerations on Afrofuturism.”
3. Reynaldo Anderson has added a few additional references here for the print version of this roundtable. These special issues are not mentioned in the original conversation.

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