

# Race in Science Fiction: The Case of Afrofuturism

*Lisa Yaszek*

## 1. Introduction

This article deals with the connection of race and science fiction. In particular, I want to concentrate on Afrofuturism – the connection of the Afrodiasporic races and science fiction. So without any further ado, let's move on. As I'm sure you know by now, either from your own travels through science fiction or from a project such as this, the story we usually tell about this subject is that science fiction was the creation of white Europeans and Americans in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, and it's not until the collapse of European colonial projects and the ascendancy of the American civil rights movement in the 1960s that we begin to see the people of color enter the genre. It's a neat and clean story – except that it's not true.

One of the most interesting things that scholars are talking about now is the fact that science fiction has actually been a global phenomenon since its inception. We see science fiction coming out of Brazil as early as the 1830s and coming out of China and Japan by the 1860s. So in short, it seems that any time a nation or an ethnic group begins to participate in industrial culture, its authors naturally turn to science fiction as the premiere story form of technoscientific modernity; as an ideal means by which to critically assess new ways of doing economics and politics and science and technology. More specifically, what we find is that authors of all color – and I would certainly include white authors in this – use science fiction to explore the necessary relations of science, society, and race and to stake claim for themselves and for their communities in the global future imaginary. As we're going to see, that is especially important in the case of Afrofuturism. And so that's exactly what we're going to look at today: the 150 years old tradition of speculative fiction written by black people called Afrofuturism.

First, let me give you a working definition of the term. Afrofuturism is speculative fiction or science fiction written by both Afrodiasporic and African authors. It's a global aesthetic movement that encompasses art, film, literature, music, and scholarship. Mark Dery talks about it as a process of "signification that appropriates images of technology and a prosthetically-enhanced future" (180) to explore the hopes and fears that people of color face in a high tech world. As I see it, there are three basic goals for Afrofuturism. The main thing that Afrofuturist

---

MLA Citation of this article:

Yaszek, Lisa. "Race in Science Fiction: The Case of Afrofuturism and New Hollywood." *A Virtual Introduction to Science Fiction*. Ed. Lars Schmeink. Web. 2013. <[http://virtual-sf.com/?page\\_id=372](http://virtual-sf.com/?page_id=372)>. 1-11.

artists want to do is tell good science fiction stories and I think that if you speak with any black science fiction author from anywhere around the globe, they'll tell you that's first and foremost what they're interested in. But there are two other political goals associated with Afrofuturism as well. Afrofuturist artists are interested in recovering lost black histories and thinking about how those histories inform a whole range of black cultures today. They also want to think about how these histories and cultures might inspire new visions of tomorrow.

Let's think a little bit more about these last two goals. A lot of scholars think about Afrofuturism as an extension of the historical recovery projects that black Atlantic intellectuals have engaged in for well over two hundred years now. As Tony Morrison has written and spoken about eloquently, these kinds of historic recovery projects show how African slaves and their descendants experienced conditions of homelessness, alienation, and dislocation that very much anticipate what Nietzsche described as the founding conditions of modernity (cf. Gilroy). And so, you can start to see why it is that science fiction appeals to Afrodiasporic artists. If you want think about black people as the primary subjects of modernity, those who have the most intense engagements with it, science fiction has the grammar that allows us to narrate those engagements. Stories about travel through time and space and stories about encounters with the alien other are ideal ways to bring those historical experiences to life for new audiences. Just to jump ahead of myself here for a moment, if you think about Derrick Bell's story "The Space Traders", you can see how the lead character, Professor Golightly, is always engaging African American history in his attempt make sense of an uncertain future, and that's what allows him to realize that the United State's deal with the aliens may not end all that well. That attempt to connect the past with the present and the future is central to the Afrofuturist project.

The next goal for Afrofuturists is a more positive one: not just to remember the bad past, but to use stories about the past and the present to reclaim the history of the future. That is what African-British music critic Kodwo Eshun talks about in his really great work on Afrofuturism. He talks about how histories of the future have been hijacked by what he calls "the futures industries" (290). "The futures industries" is his term for the place where technoscience, fictional media, and market prediction meet – especially as the ideas generated by those industries are conveyed across the globe by the mass media. What you tend to see in the mainstream media, again and again and again, is the sense that blackness is a catastrophe. Black spaces are zones of absolute dystopias where either capitalism hasn't had a chance to intervene yet or where capitalism has failed. We see this again and again in the news: black cities are always depicted in dystopic ways. Africa is a gigantic continent, with lots of different ecosystems and cultures and nations and people and events and histories, and yet its always treated somehow

as THE place of dystopia, plagued by drought, AIDS, and famine, and we rarely hear positive things about progress in African unless it is in terms of capitalist intervention.

For Eshun, Afrofuturism is important because it is a kind of storytelling that gives authors a public means by which to intervene into those bad futures that are written by the futures industry and to challenge them, change them, write altogether new ones. Interestingly, Eshun riffs a bit on W.E.B. Dubois when he talks about this. As some of you might know, Dubois was an African American sociologist who wrote science fiction and who coined the term "double consciousness," (*Souls* 8) which means that black people always live under the consciousness of being both African and American. What Eshun sees as valuable about Afrofuturism is that it has the ability to enhance double consciousness and even to triple or quadruple or quintuple consciousness, to give us a sense that there are a lot of different ways to think about being black and to think about the relations of the science, society, and race. This allows authors to create complex futures in full color rather than ones that are either simply white washed utopias or black dystopias.

## **2. Afrofuturism in the United States: 1850-1960**

So now that I've given you a little bit of background on the goals of Afrofuturism, I want to take you through a brief history of this genre and give you some reading recommendations. The first period I want to write about here is a long one – the development of Afrofuturism in the United States, which happened from about 1850 to 1960. This period, as you know, marks the establishment of science fiction as well as Afrofuturism and both were popular genres with a lot of similarities from the very beginning. Both science fiction and Afrofuturism were generally written at first by respected mainstream writers who were experimenting with a variety of emergent genres. A few famous examples of early sf authors are Mary Shelley, who played with the Gothic and writes proto-sf in *Frankenstein* (1818); H.G. Wells, who perfected the future war story in *The Battle of Dorking* (1871) and *War of the Worlds* (1898); and Edward Bellamy, who updated the utopia to speak to the industrial age and created a new form, the techno-utopia, with *Looking Backwards* (1887).

We see a similar trend in American Afrofuturism at this point in time. For instance, Charles Chestnutt was a mainstream writer who wrote short stories such as "The Goophered Grapevine" (1887), which is a gothic commentary on US racism that revolves around white northerners who come to the south and have

to deal with the history of racism and of slavery as that history has impacted the vineyard that the northerners are buying.

Sutton E. Griggs' *Imperio in Imperium* (1899) is a future war story where US blacks take up arms against their white oppressors. It's a fascinating story because throughout most of the novel, one protagonist is much more peaceful than the other. In looking for an integrated solution to racism, that particular protagonist tries every technoscientific means possible. In particular, he tries to educate blacks to become engineers and agriculture experts and to show that they can be modern technocultural citizens. Finally that fails and the other protagonist encourages black people pick up arms and "not shirk war, if war is forced" (245), thus calling for a future, no matter the means necessary.

A final important story from this time period is Edward A. Johnson's *New Light Ahead for the Negro* (1904), which imagines a scientific agricultural utopia predicated on black knowledge and industry. So that's a story in which blacks essentially transform America into a more productive and racially integrated country by leveraging the technoscientific knowledge that they gained as slaves and the education they gained as free people to build a better south.

That takes us through the roots of Afrofuturism. The genre continued to develop in the early 20th century in a way that we might describe as 'separate but equal.' You may or may not be familiar with this phrase, but it was central to American politics and society at the turn of the 20th century and was supposed to mean that blacks and whites could share equally in America's resources but keep their cultures distinct from one another. And while this did indeed encourage the development of two separate societies, they were not equal by any stretch of the imagination. Instead, the rhetoric of 'separate but equal' became a way to keep most resources in the hands of whites and away from blacks. Now, let's take that back to science fiction publishing at the turn of the 20th century, where we find that black and white authors alike are writing science fiction, but publishing in different venues. For the most part, white authors published in white owned and operated magazines like *Weird Tales* and *Amazing Stories* and *Astounding Science Fiction*. Meanwhile, Afrofuturist authors published in primarily black owned and operator newspapers like *The Crisis* and the *Pittsburgh Courier*.

What's particularly interesting in this case is that this wasn't a separate but equal policy enforced by whites, but instead seems to have been chosen by black authors themselves. There seems to be a number of reasons for this collective decision. One point that Samuel Delany makes is that a lot black authors avoided the genre magazines because they looked so frivolous. If you look at the images of covers and inside the magazines, you can see how *The Crisis* sometimes printed science fictional covers, like the September 1927 issue of a gigantic woman holding the sun up over a little tiny city. In some ways this anticipates

campy Hollywood science fiction movies of the 1950s, but the actual design is very much part of the modernist art movement and so signals 'high literature' rather than 'genre literature.' By way of contrast, covers from *Amazing Stories* were very straightforward and meant to appeal to readers on a visceral level: you know when you read this it won't be a metaphor for anything, you're really reading a story about tiny men fighting gigantic bugs. And so you can imagine that some authors might have felt if you're going to try to publish a story about black revolution or black technoscientific genius, it might not be taken particularly seriously in magazines about tiny little white people fighting gigantic bugs.

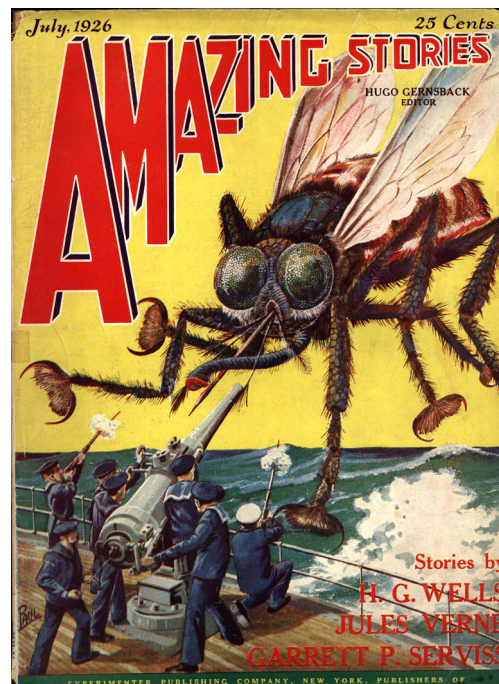


Image: Issue of *The Crisis*, September 1927 and Issue of *Amazing Stories*, July 1926.

The other reason that black authors don't seem to have published much in the early genre magazines is, quite simply that there were indeed a number of racist stories published in those magazines. Perhaps the most famous example of this is Stanley G. Weinbaum's "A Martian Odyssey", a story from 1932. This is a story that often treated as central to science fiction history because it is sympathetic to the alien other and tries to find connections between humans and aliens. Up until that time, you didn't see that many stories like that. Of course the problem is that the humans populating Weinbaum's story *know* that the Martians they encounter are intelligent and rational beings precisely because their knowledge classification systems are more sophisticated than those of African people on earth. So the story suggests that you cannot be a 'real' person if you are black – and especially if you still live in Africa. You can see why people like DuBois, Chesnutt, and Griggs

might have not wanted to publish in magazines featuring such stories – it didn't seem like a particularly hospitable venue. Too many battles would have to be fought.

So now that we know where turn of the century Afrofuturists published and now that we have a better sense of why they published there, let's consider the main questions that comes up time and again in Afrofuturist stories of this period: "will there be a future for black people?" and "what is it that black people will have to do to secure a future where they are free citizens?" To answer those questions, Afrofuturist authors told their audiences thrilling stories about black people who use science and technology to do amazing things: survive disasters, start revolutions, and build brave new worlds. Let me tell you about three of my favorite stories from this period of US-Afrofuturism. The first is Martin Delaney's *Blake or the Huts of America*, which was published in the *Anglo-African Magazine* in serialized form between 1859 and 1862. *Blake* is set in an alternate world African American slaves revolt against their white southern masters and establish a free black state in Cuba. Once they're there, they plan to use all the knowledge that they've gained as slaves to build their own cotton empire, thereby undermining the United States' grip on the cotton industry and making the new black nation state a technological world player. What is perhaps most fascinating about this story is that Delaney and his friends actually were really going to do this. All the proceeds from *Blake* went into a fund to send free blacks back to Liberia where they were would partner with African farmers to build a cotton empire and get an economic stranglehold on the American south. I like that this is a book that's about something that black people were really going to try to do, so it becomes science fictional on two levels.

Another story from this period that is both interesting and important is W. E. B. DuBois' "The Comet." DuBois is most famously known as a sociologist and one of the first modern theorists of race relations. He actually wrote a couple science fiction stories about this including "The Comet," which is from a collection of stories that DuBois published in 1920. This is a disaster story where a comet that passes through the Earth's atmosphere releases a poisonous gas that seems to kill everyone except one black man who is down in a bank vault at the time. When he comes up, our protagonist is, at first, completely horrified by the situation. But the longer he is by himself on Earth, the more he starts to like it because all of the sudden he has access to cars and goods that he couldn't have before, he can go eat at restaurants he wasn't allowed into before, and so it seems that maybe this disaster wasn't quite so bad after all. Eventually our protagonist meets up with a white woman who describes herself as a photographer and a feminist. At first our two heroes see each other as aliens – and literally that's how DuBois writes about it, as being "alien in blood and culture" ("The Comet" 17). But they

quickly overcome their differences and decide they are going to create a new race together. Sadly, this plan doesn't work out because eventually readers learn that the poison gas didn't kill everyone. Instead, the whites come back to reclaim their lost daughter and we learn that the only person who has really died in this disaster is the black man's child. So it seems that DuBois is saying that the only way that race relations in America will ever be fixed is through a catastrophe that wipes out black and white people alike.

The third story I want to talk about from this time period is George Schuyler's *Black Empire*, originally published in the *Pittsburgh Courier* as two serials, "Black Internationale" and "Black Empire," between 1936 and 1938. *Black Empire* imagines an alternate present where Afrodiasporic people pool their scientific, military, artistic, and business talents to enact a global revolution against the white nations that have enslaved and otherwise oppressed them for over two centuries. They do so by decimating the United States with biological warfare, bombing Europe into submission, and establishing a utopian Black Empire in Africa. As you might guess from even this brief description, it's an exciting story, made all the more so because the editors of the *Pittsburgh Courier* – which was the largest black owned and read newspaper of its day – ran Schuyler's story in installments on the front page, side by side with regular news items. Of course, people were just as smart then as they are today, and so I'm sure nobody mistook *Black Empire* for "real" news, but imagine how ... *thought provoking* it must have been to read this story of black global revolution alongside regular reports of ongoing economic depression, forthcoming world war, and the frustrated civil rights movement.

### **3. Afrofuturism in the United States: 1960-present**

The second major phase of Afrofuturism extends from 1960 to the present and marks the period in which Afrofuturism integrates with mainstream science fiction. I suspect there are two reasons why this integration happens at this time. First, this period marks the peak of the civil rights movement across the United States, and so naturally we see this in literature as well. Second, a new generation of science fiction authors associated with "The New Wave" were in the process of redefining science fiction itself, and one of their main interests was to make the genre socially as well as scientifically relevant. The 1960s and 1970s saw critically-acclaimed authors including Samuel Delany, Octavia Butler, Charles Saunders, and Steve Barnes begin publishing stories about science, society, and race with mainstream science fiction magazines and presses. Today, you can find all these authors and dozens more collected in anthologies such as Sherree R. Thomas's

*Dark Matter* (2000) and *Dark Matter: Reading the Bones* (2004), celebrated by science fiction groups such as the Carl Brandon Society, and featured at events such as OnyxCon and the Black to the Future Conference.

Like their predecessors, Afrofuturists of this period are interested in questions of science, society, race, and futurity. Given the relative success of the civil rights movement, most contemporary artists assume that yes, there will indeed be some sort of future for black people. But this leads to a new question: what will that future look like? To answer that question, Afrofuturists of this period create startling new worlds of tomorrow extrapolated specifically from the Afrodiasporic past. Consider, for instance, Octavia Butler's award-winning story "Bloodchild," first published in *Asimov's* magazine in 1984. "Bloodchild" takes place in a future where humans who have left Earth to colonize the stars are enslaved by bug-like aliens, who use humans to carry their eggs to term. Slavery has just ended and, like their post-Civil War counterparts in 19th-century America, the two races have entered a period of reconstruction in which they must acknowledge their unequal but inevitable interdependence and find a way to replace relations based on ignorance and violence with cross-species education and interpersonal connection. In some ways it's a profoundly uncomfortable story, but it's also a hopeful one – after all, "Bloodchild" ends much like a classic Hollywood story, with our female bug protagonist and her human male lover locked in the kind of romantic embrace that is sure to lead to a new generation of offspring and, Butler suggests, a new and better world order.

While "Bloodchild" celebrates the kind of interracial dialog and interpersonal connections that made change possible in the United States, other stories, such as Derrick Bell's "The Space Traders," serve as warnings that history can also repeat itself in bad ways. "The Space Traders" was written in 1992 and made into a short film for HBO's *Cosmic Slop* two years later<sup>1</sup>. As you'll see, both the print and film versions of this chilling little tale take place in a slightly alternate near future where the United States has entered a period of decline and is in danger of losing its status as a world power. Suddenly, a group of mysterious aliens show up and promise to solve the country's problems if it just hands over its black people. As mentioned before, Harvard professor Golightly tries to reason with the white government to decline the offer and fulfill its humanistic duties to its black citizens. But all his efforts are for naught, and the story closes with an image that invokes Afrodiasporic history as black Americans are rounded up, chained together, and herded onto a ship that will take them into a future not of their own making.

---

1 You can watch the video for free at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D8yFiam9260> (last checked 01.08.2013).



Still other authors ask what the world might look like if history itself had played out differently. This question drives Steve Barnes' 2002 novel *Lion's Blood* and its 2003 sequel, *Zulu Heart*. Barnes' books are alternate histories in which Africa becomes the center of technoscientific development and Africans colonize the Americas using tribal Europeans as slave labor. While this allows for a slightly different mode of technoculture – one driven by balloons and slow air power rather than trains and other fast, steam powered devices – the social relations structuring Barnes' world end up looking much like those of the 19th-century United States. And so even though the players have changed roles, history ends up repeating itself – complete with the elimination of indigenous American animals and people.

#### **4. Global Afrofuturism: 1980-present**

Finally, I want to point out a third strain of Afrofuturism that emerged in the 1980s and is still in a real growth period today – what I call "global Afrofuturism." Like their counterparts in the United States, global Afrofuturists often publish with Western science fiction magazines and publishing houses. They also exchange ideas and collaborate with other Afrofuturists around the world via online venues including *Jungle Jim* (a bimonthly African pulp magazine), *Story Time* (a weekly genre fiction by African writers) and *3Bute* (an online anthology devoted to questions of African modernity).

Global Afrofuturists are also like their American counterparts in that many of their stories revolve around the questions of race and futurity. Here, the main question is: will the future look like the past and present as experienced by people from the United States of all colors or will it reflect the experiences of black people from other parts of the world? Extrapolating from their own personal and historical experiences, such authors generally create truly strange new futures by combining elements of the West and the rest. Consider, for instance, Nalo Hopkinson's award-winning 2000 novel *Midnight Robber*, which imagines a future where intergalactic and cross-temporal colonization are enabled by a novel combination of advanced computing networks, nanotechnology, and Caribbean storytelling practices. That strange combination of technoscientific and cultural practices turns out to be key to the creation of a new and more egalitarian future: Hopkinson's heroine survives life in a hostile world and even negotiates a peaceful new future for humans and aliens precisely because she can put 'white' science and 'black' culture together in productive new ways.

Kenyan-Canadian author Minister Faust takes this kind of technocultural blending a step further in the critically acclaimed 2004 book *Coyote Kings of the*

*Space Age Bachelor Pad*. Here, two African-Canadian geeks must combine everything they've learned from Western science fiction, comic books, and role playing games with ancient African scientific and military practices when they discover that one of them is the lynchpin in a 7000-year old struggle between good and evil. While the story might seem exotic, Faust makes it legible to Western readers with characters who are quite familiar – including the naïve young man who must harness his supernatural talents, the wisecracking sidekick who can build anything, and the mysterious warrior princess who recruits them to her cause. As one of my students put it after struggling with Faust's novel all semester: "I finally get it! It's like *Star Wars*, but set twenty years ago in Canada with black people."

Ghanaian Jonathan Dotse's 2011 short story "Virus!" – the first part of a forthcoming novel called *Accra 2057* – uses similar techniques to appeal to a global audience. "Virus!" follows the adventures of a teenaged girl from rural Ghana who uses the computer installed in her head to become an illegal information runner in the exciting but dangerous underworld of the city of Accra in the year 2057. After nearly losing her life to a seemingly rogue virus, she teams up with a retired policeman and an exiled computer programmer to uncover a plot for world domination emanating from the heart of the Saharan desert. What I find most amazing about this story is that it's steeped in Ghanaian history and culture, but easy to absorb because it's told in a form that will be familiar to anyone who has read William Gibson's classic cyberpunk novel *Neuromancer* or seen the Wachowski siblings' *Matrix* trilogy.

## 5. Conclusion

Science fiction is, in essence, a global language that enables people to communicate their experience of science, technology, and society across centuries, continents, and cultures. This is certainly true of the Afrodiasporic and African speculative storytelling traditions that I've group together under the name 'Afrofuturism.' There is a tendency in the mainstream media to treat black people as the victims of a wholly dystopic technoscientific modernity. In this version of history, Afro-diasporic people are the unlucky descendants of slaves upon whose backs modern Western nations were built, and Africans are the victims of colonization practices that have wrought nothing but disease and famine. However, as I hope to have shown you today, Afrofuturists insist that the past, present, and future are more complicated than that. In early Afrofuturist stories, slavery produces misery, but it also produces technoscientific genius. In later stories, the stories of slavery and colonization – the story of modernity's bad past – becomes the source of inspiration for imagining what might be truly new and at least slightly better futures. And

that is what I find so compelling about Afrofuturism: Like all the best science fiction, it gives us hope that there are different ways be citizens of the modern global world.

### *Works Cited*

*3Bute*. Web. 10.08.2013. <<http://3bute.com>>.

Dery, Mark. "Black to the Future: Interviews with Samuel R. Delany, Greg Tate, and Tricia Rose." *Flame Wars: The Discourse of Cyberculture*. Ed. Mark Dery. Durham: Duke UP, 1994. 179-222.

DuBois, W.E.B. *The Souls of Black Folk*. Ed. B.E. Hayes. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2008.

—. "The Comet." *Dark Matter: A Century of Speculative Fiction from the African Diaspora*. Ed. Sheree R. Thomas. New York: Warner, 2000. 5-18.

Eshun, Kodwo. "Further Considerations on Afrofuturism." *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3.2 (2003): 287-302.

Gilroy, Paul. "Living Memory: An Interview with Toni Morrison." *Small Acts: Thoughts on the Politics of Black Cultures*. London: Serpent's Tail, 1993. 175-82.

Griggs, Sutton E. *Imperium in Imperio: A Study of the Negro Race Problem*. 1899. New York: Arno, 1969.

*Jungle Jim*. Web. 10.08.2013. <<http://www.junglejim.org/>>.

*Story Time*. Web. 10.08.2013. <<http://publishyourstory.blogspot.com/>>.