Black Theater, Black Studies, and Afrofuturism: An Exploration of Past, Present, and Future

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Afrofuturism and Black Futurity

Afrofuturism is a term first used by white cultural critic, Mark Dery, in a 1994 essay titled *Black to the Future*. Dery seeks to explain the phenomena of Black literary prowess that was uninterested in white approval and the growing parallel to twentieth-century techno culture.[1] Further defining Afrofuturism, we find Black Studies scholar Alondra Nelson who, in the journal, *Social Text* expertly marries Black diasporic culture to futurity. As she simply explains, the subject and its development within Black culture was related to "things to come," [2] without the need for permission. Other scholars, such as Ytasha Womack engage with Afrofuturism as a boundless arena for Black futurists to activate their creativity, imagination, and inspire others to ideate the just world they want to live in through the speculative play within the genre.[3] adrienne maree brown and Walidah Imarisha's edited volume *Ocatvia's Brood: Science Fiction Stories from Social Justice Movements* is an ode to the legendary Afrofuturist author Octavia Butler. This collection of science fiction stories ingeniously positions Afrofuturism as an organizing tool where Walidah Imirisha explains "We want organizers and movement builders to be able to claim the vast space of possibility, to be birthing visionary stories."[4] This provides an early nod to the engagement with the Black Radical Tradition and the potency of probing Black historiography. Afrofuturism does not discount Black history. It is driven by it and provides the type of synthesis that shows that the speculative has always been present in the culture of Black literature. This thought exists at the intersection where just as the realities of anti-Black racism have never retreated, resistance in the form of the Black imagination remained present in Black notions of futurity.

Afrofuturism and the Black Radical Tradition

[1] Mark Dery, "Black to the Future: Interviews with Samuel R. Delany, Greg Tate, and Tricia Rose," in *Flame Wars: The Discourse of Cyberculture*, ed. Mark Dery (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994), 180.

[2] Alondra Nelson, "Afrofuturism," *Social Text* 20, no. 3 (2002), 8-9 https://doi.org/10.1215/01642472-20-3_72-np.

[3] Ytasha Womack, *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture* (Chicago: Review Press, 2013), 6.

[4] Walidah Imarisha, "Introduction" in *Octavia's Brood*: *Science Fiction Stories from Social Justice Movements,* ed. adrienne maree brown and Walidah Imarisha (Chico: AK Press, 2015), 3.

Reiland Rabaka helps us understand the Black Radical Tradition as a remembrance of the traditions of radicalism found within a continuum of Black intellectualism.[5] This definition of the Black Radical Tradition includes Afrofuturism with respect to its movement-based provision of agency in facilitating the envisioning Black liberation. Although it is represented in literary genres such as science fiction, it also holds an identity that is linked to epistemology and theoretical logic. For instance, Abdul Alkalimat lays out the foundations of Black Utopian thinking, which values the ideals of envisioning a future without the violence or targeted discrimination of anti-Black racism.[6]

In the introduction to *Black Utopia: The History of an Idea from Black Nationalism to Afrofuturism*, Alex Zamalin, details the utopian futurity found in the literature of legendary Black authors, he offers that:

> Black American reflections on the idea of utopia contain some of the most powerful political ideas in the American tradition. Black utopians and anti-utopians detailed new visions of collective life and racial identity. They outlined futuristic ways of being. They warned about the disastrous ways of contemporary life. Justice was transfigured. They theorized what was scientifically improbable and a new Black citizen that seemed impossible.[7]

He goes on to dialogue with the history of Black people being forced into more dystopian lives that disallowed much room for having the agency to expand into utopian thinking because of physical and socioeconomic restraints.[8]

This type of intellectualism provides activation for an embrace of utopian reasoning as resistance to the dehumanization of Black people by way of futurity in areas like storytelling or dramatic interpretation. The reasoning here queries the notion that perhaps Black Theater for example has always reflected the times and imagined not only alternative realities but also answers to the root causes of oppression or degradation by telling its own stories. This is not to say that all Black writing is based solely on struggle but certainly, there is a foundational aspect that leads to the realization of the need to be heard, for arguments to be made, and for expression or entertainment to reflect cultural production.

Black Studies As Conceptual Analysis

[5] Reiland Rabaka, *Africana Critical Theory: Reconstructing the Black Radical Tradition, from W.E.B. DuBois and C.L.R. James to Frantz Fanon and Amilcar Cabral*, (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2010), 3.

[6] Abdul Alkalimat, *The History of Black Studies* (London: Pluto Press, 2022), 11-17.

[7] Alex Zamalin, *Black Utopia: The History of an Idea from Black Nationalism to Afrofuturism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019), 1.

[8] Zamalin, *Black Utopia*, 1.

Fortunately, an example of how we can approach specifically conceptualizing Black Studies as a relevant and practical means of interacting with Afrofuturism can be found in Reynaldo Anderson and Charles E. Jones' edited volume *Afrofuturism 2.0: The Rise of Astro-Blackness.* In it, the contours and nuances of Afrofuturism receive a treatment that is meant to place Black Studies in conversation entirely with the topic. Important to this writing is the book's representation of Black Studies' interdisciplinary relationships to topics like performance, which is an area where we can locate Black Theater. Thusly, the case for Black Studies and its properties for framing an analysis of Black futurity can be made for utilization in a thematic examination of how well-suited the discipline is for elucidating the nuance of the Black Radical Tradition. Alkalimat explores Black Studies in three sections of historical framing, 1) Black Studies as intellectual history 2) Black Studies as a social movement 3) Black Studies as an academic profession.[9] According to Karenga, Black Studies is an academic discipline that critically and systematically studies the thought and practices of African and African-descended people in their current and historical unfolding.[10] Karenga further characterizes the academic field as a study, analysis, and general exploration of core areas of culture (e.g. History, Religion, Social Organization, Economics, Politics, Creativity, and Ethos).[11] Connecting to a wide range of subjects and theoretical areas such as critical theory, Black Studies is interdisciplinary serving both a critique and expansion of the Eurocentric canon of education. Thusly it seeks to explore beyond normative or reductive narratives that lack critical interrogation of their meanings within the timeline of the Black experience. An example of this might be uncritical approaches to Black history that include a mention of slavery as if this is where Black people's stories began. Or the propensity some have to highlight the parts of Martin Luther King Jr's writings or speeches that tend to serve whiteness, then on to Barack Obama's presidency as the Black crowning achievement of racial justice. Black Studies does not act as if there is not a broader examination of the global Black experience but instead, it works to include an interrogation of nuance and complexity.

Black Studies arrived in academia in the late 1960s as part of the political demands of students who in some cases had been involved in the Southern Black Freedom Movement or who were deeply influenced by the Black Power Movement. Peniel Joseph posited that:

> The Black Power Movement fundamentally altered struggles for racial justice through an uncompromising quest for social, political, and cultural transformation. The movement's sheer breadth during the late 1960s and 1970s encompassed virtually every facet of African American political life in the United States and beyond.[12]

[9] Alkalimat, *The History of Black Studies*, 13.
[10] Maulana Karenga, *Introduction to Black Studies*, 4th ed. (Los Angeles: University of Sankore Press, 2010), 3.
[11] Karenga, *Introduction to Black Studies*, 3.
[12] Peniel Joseph, "Rethinking the Black Power Era" *The Journal of Southern History* 75, no. 3 (2009), 707-708.

The demands for Black Studies programs by Black Student Unions saw programs developed across the country to broaden knowledge about the global Black experience. Ama Mazama discusses the malaise of defining Black Studies but makes clear the intentions of the discipline to cultivate scholar-activists, and also details the role of institutions in diverting that pathway.[13] Terry Kershaw also takes up this example, which places an epistemological uniqueness on Black Studies that if enacted within its design, can bend to consider both the layperson and higher education participant as students.[14] This develops a pathway for a democratized collective knowledge that privileges the lessons of the framers of a Black Studies intellectual tradition that is meant to center culture and analysis. The theoretical foundations and historical framing of Black Studies are welcoming to Afrofuturistic discourse in this sense because it develops a course of study that goes beyond the classroom. Black Studies can in many ways surpass academia and be welcomed and comfortable in non-traditional Western learning spaces as an open repository of cultural knowledge. Thus, signaling to the learner that they can be active participants and contributors to a broader context of how Black futurity should be portrayed within the social imagination. The visionary work of Carter G. Woodson established a basis for interweaving academic and non-academic Black learning through his determined championing of Black History education. In his seminal work *The Mis-Education of the Negro,* Woodson condemns an education that takes the Black student away from the notion that their education should be oriented toward solving problems in their communities.[15] For the expansion of an epistemological treatment of Black Theater and its futurity, it is adaptable because Black Studies can also eschew a linear narrative or depiction of Black life.

Locating Black Theater's Afrofuturism in the Black Radical Tradition

After spending time defining Afrofuturism and Black futurity and establishing a theoretical pathway for analysis through Black Studies, we can now begin to place the inquiry into the historical framing of Black Theater within the Black Radical Tradition. One may posit that Black Theater in its origin and practice relates to a continuum of history of resistance in the same ways we can identify other art forms such as music, film, fine art, and dance. It is equally as relatable to the politics of the world but can encompass multiple other art forms on the way to dramatic interpretation and expression. There is also the potential that we can find distinctions between iterations of Black Theater by way of critique, where a choice is based on multiple entry points. It is here that Dominic Taylor's delineation between Black Theater and African American Theater, which he maintains are two different things, that can involve Black people and reference

[13] Ama Mazama, "The Intellectual Basis for Black Studies Discourse: Interdisciplinary, Transdisciplinary, or Undisciplinary? Africana Studies and the Vexing Question of Definition" in *Handbook of Black Studies* eds. Molefi Kete Asante and Maulana Karenga, (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2006), 9.

[14] Terry Kershaw, "The Black Studies Paradigm: The Making of Scholar-Activists" in *Afrocentricity and Philosophy* eds. James Conyers (Jefferson: McFarland and Company Publishers, 2003), 27-36.

[15] Carter G. Woodson, *The Mis-Education of the Negro* (New York: Associated Publishers, 1933; Suwanee: 12th Media Services, 1999), 6.

Black culture.[16] Taylor helps those of us who are not artists or theater scholars understand that Black Theater is very much associated with the need for it to be concerned with responding to Black people's needs. African American Theater, on the other hand, may emanate from white institutions or respond to white audiences and be beholden to whiteness. Some of Taylor's thoughts about Black Theater speak to this work's exploration of a through line between Afrofuturism and Black Studies that lift the value of Black Theater as an interpreter of futurity. He includes W.E.B. Du Bois' assertion that Black Theater is a seeker of truth as not an abstraction but a functional tool used to set the world right. Taylor also explains that Black Theater also is identifiable with spiritual experiences.

In doing so Taylor offers an important distinction around how speculative narratives found in Afrofuturism distinctly speak to the Black Radical Tradition as studies by Black Studies scholars. The road to the inquiry here further encourages looking to Black Theater to depict the unflinching complexity, joy, and laughter of Black lived experiences and futurity through its storytelling within the scope of Black Studies' interdisciplinary framing. For the sake of this style of storytelling, Taylor's Black Theater supports the aim of endeavoring to confront power and to have a specific attentiveness and fidelity to Black cultural resistance.

History points to the first Black Theater, African Grove Theatre, founded by William Brown and James Hewlitt in 1821. Both witnessed and experienced the folklore and cultural traditions of enslaved Black people in the Caribbean and no doubt related to their own cultural experiences.[17] The very thought of independence and Black people simply enjoying themselves brought to bear the full complement of white backlash that saw African Grove ultimately violently overrun and shut down. This represented a form of resistance based on just "being" and having the nerve to embrace the power of telling one's own story or controlling a narrative that includes you as opposed to someone else doing so. The evolution of Black Theater after African Grove was established maintains a connection to thematically disseminating culture and values.[18] Black Theater provides a counter-narrative to anti-Blackness as a form of social protest and gives a level of agency not only to communicate in an idiomatic way but also to convey subversiveness through performance. Following this line of thinking we can understand further Harry Elam's explanation of the act of making and performing Black Theater as a valuable response to negative dehumanizing narratives.[19]

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[16] Dominic Taylor, "Don't Call African-American Theatre Black Theatre: It's Like Calling a Dog a Cat," *The Massachusetts Review*, September 19, 2019. https://www.massreview.org/node/10262.

[17] Samuel A. Hay, *African American Theatre: A Historical and Critical Analysis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 4.

[18] Carlton W. Molette and Barbara J. Molette, *Afrocentric Theatre* (Bloomington: Xlibris Corp., 2013), 67.

[19] Harry Elam and David Krasner, eds. *African American Performance and Theatre History: A Critical Reader,* 1st ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 288.

Black Theater and a Historical Framing in the Black Radical Tradition and Afrofuturism

The connective tissue for this writing is how Black Studies as an academic and non-academic course of study analyzes the deployment of Black Theater as praxis and as the interpreter of new knowledge that is based on an Afrofuturistic lens. There will always be a space for the referencing of Black Theater's capacity for amplifying issues or critical history and developing a rich narrative that works to define and privilege identity. Afrofuturism is embraced and included in the conversation when we think critically about the dialogue between characters, settings, and general orientation of the story unfolding on the stage and how it all speaks to futurity. The grounding in Black Studies and using the discipline to locate Afrofuturism as part of the Black Radical Tradition is key to a synthesis of three points relating to Black Theater and the realm of Black Possibility. For a deeper read into the Black Radical Tradition's relationship to Black Theater, we can look to historical examples such as iconic Author, Folklorist, Anthropologist, and Dramatist Zora Neale Hurston. Hurston was both a keen imaginer and chronicler of Black realities who is widely known for her works of fiction and less for her work in ethnographic research. However, a deeper foray into Hurston's engagement with Black experiences through ethnography and the lives of her characters tells us that she also considered it important that these things should be actively interpreted. Through the lens of drama, Hurston's theatrical writing allows for an understanding that narrative in the form of literature could in many ways be slightly incomplete without some form of physical expression.[20] Hurston's experiences as a supporting worker with a theater company may well be where this valuation of the use of drama to bring forth the boldness of stories came from. But for sure, we can recognize that her passionate ability to bring forth life-changing Black stories was not at all something that could be contained by a singular form of expression. In her 1934 essay *Characteristics of Negro Expression*, she weaves an academic and artistic discourse into not only what should be recognized as an early template for the contemporary field of Performance Studies, but also a centering of Black drama's cultural inherency.[21] Hurston offers that the natural bearing of Black life is performative. Her interest in the Black experience speaks to a Black Radical Tradition of subverting the static reality and inserting interpretation through the performance of a narrative that cannot be denied its standing.

Another historical example of the Black Radical Tradition that subverts and confronts reality can be found in the dramatists of The Black Arts Movement. This culturally grounded artistic movement that, according to Larry Neal, is the "aesthetic and spiritual sister"[22] of the Black Power Movement began with the establishment of the Black Arts Repertory Theatre in

[20] Zora Neale Hurston, *Zora Neale Hurston: Collected Plays*, eds. Jean Lee Cole and Charles Mitchell (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2008), xv.

[21] Zora Neale Hurston, "Characteristics of Negro Expression," in *Within the Circle: An Anthology of African American Literary Criticism from the Harlem Renaissance to the Present*, ed. Angelyn Mitchell (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994), 79-96.

[22] Larry Neal, "The Black Arts Movement," 1st electronic ed., *The Drama Review: TDR* 12, no. 4 (1968), 1.

1965. Larry Neal, who also coined the phrase Black Arts Movement, in 1968 defined it in this way:

> The Black Arts Movement is radically opposed to any concept of the artist that alienates him from his community. This movement is the aesthetic and spiritual sister of the Black Power concept. As such, it envisions an art that speaks directly to the needs and aspirations of Black America.[23]

Some of the playwrights and writers associated with and responsible for using their activism and art to establish cultural institutions that uphold Black pride were Amiri Baraka, Ron Milner, Ed Bullins, Philip Hayes Dean, Richard Wesley, Lonne Elder III, Sonia Sanchez, and Barbara Ann Teer.[24]

The legacy of the Black Arts Movement very likely informed and influenced the groundbreaking speech delivered by legendary playwright August Wilson on June 26, 1996, at the 11th biennial Theatre Communications Group national conference at New Jersey's Princeton University. Wilson invoked the names of Nat Turner, Denmark Vesey, Martin Delany, Marcus Garvey, and the Honorable Elijah Muhammad, and referenced a lack of mention of the Black Power Movement in historical reference. In doing this, Wilson, arguably the most influential playwright the world has known, situated himself in the Black Radical Tradition while maintaining his distinguished place in the theater space. In his speech, Wilson did not attempt to disassociate himself from what we saw as the struggle for Black liberation. He clearly centered his values on the cause of Black liberation eloquently and unflinchingly. Making references to the enslavement, Wilson made correlations to its history and his observation that even then, decades after the 1960s, relevant concerns remained, and work still needs to be done to combat anti-Black racism.

The established base in Black Radical Tradition can lead to the exploration of its history of futurism in Black Theater can be explored as a lasting connection to the subversion of Black realities. Black Arts Movement activist Barbara Ann Teer is a particular example of the type of futuristic visioning Black Studies scholars can study as part of the Black Radical Tradition in Black Theater. Teer, the founder of the National Black Theatre in Harlem, wrote in the New York Times in 1968 that:

> I believe the need for a [Black cultural art form] is far more critical even than the issue of white racism…All Black artists must begin either to build or to support, Black theatres in

[23] Neal, "The Black Arts Movement," 1.

[24] John H. Bracey, Sonia Sanchez, and James Smethurst, eds., *SOS-Calling All Black People: A Black Arts Movement Reader* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2014).

> all the Black communities in America, theatres that should be concerned with the truth of our lives.[25]

Also, a Black Studies enthusiast, she envisioned a future for Black Theater that manifests in a physical space for the celebration of Black culture and that serves as a memorial to the Black arts. Although not a work of speculative fiction, her actions speak to the relationship between Afrofuturistic thought and imagining the future you want to see.

Counter-narrative revisions of history that feature a rejection of anti-Blackness are a hallmark of the literature of Afrofuturism through the likes of Octavia Butler, Samuel R. Delaney, and even W.E.B. Du Bois. But in the storytelling of Black Theater, we can often find characters who interpret and perform Black futurity through an engagement with the Black imagination. An example is found in Pearl Cleage's play *Flyin West*. Set in the era of the Exodusters (circa 1879) who were Black people that migrated to Kansas for land opportunities and to escape the degradation and dangers of racial violence, Cleage provides a historical narrative around the migration of a Black family, provides class and gender-based points of thought and debate, activates a budding love story, and implements realistic emotions around the state of Black people. All these things relate to Black Studies' interest in exploring and analyzing the history and culture of Black people. The significance here is that theater activates the inquiry. To drill deeper, however, the gun-wielding character Sophie embodies Afrofuturism in her plans for the town of Nicodemus, going as far as drawing a map that encompassed schools, a library, and the implements for a self-governed municipality. Sophie's acts represent an embrace of futurity that is insistent and focused on establishing a material reality for her family, and Black people more broadly should be able to avail themselves of. Sophie's character had the foresight and boldness to create this reality in resistance to the forces that exclude her, her family, and Black people from the usual comforts and common amenities.

Another example of Afrofuturism can be found in history with the movement building of the Black organizers of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and extends to Black Theater's futurity. Working largely in the South in the 1960s, with an eye toward the future, SNCC demanded to be realized through their actions. The notion of a just future that motivated the work of those Black activists is part of the legacy of a movement that led to the founding of Black Studies and worked to further the cause of freedom.[26] The 1964 Freedom Schools can be seen as an example of their futurism as they opened temporary schools in communities during the Mississippi Summer Project, or the better-known term, Freedom

[25] Deb Clapp, "Barbara Ann Teer Was Unapologetically Black," *American Theatre*, April 10, 2020, https://www.americantheatre.org/2020/04/10/barbara-ann-teer-was-unapologetically-black/

[26] Wesley C. Hogan, *Many Minds, One Heart: SNCC's Dream for a New America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 231.

Summer.[27] The Freedom Schools projected a more just future for Black people and deployed other resources such as the Free Southern Theater. The Free Southern Theater, made of up SNCC theater artists, toured the Freedom Schools and offered the school-aged children a look into a future that featured them.[28] Free Southern Theater is an example of a powerful tool that was informed by Afrofuturist themes and expressions that confronted white supremacy and envisioned the world anew, not merely activated by racism but rather by communicating freedom through culture. These are the types of themes and intellectual spaces Black Studies endeavors to explore and explain from a critical platform.

Circling Back and Moving Forward

Although there are contemporary representations of Black Theater that are relevant to this discourse, the situating of historical references is a strategic effort to highlight the continuum of Black futurity. Just as the Black Radical Tradition is full of examples that are often waiting to be discovered, analyzed, explored deeply, and shared, the interface with interpretations of Black futurity in Black Theater is also fertile. The futurity of its playwriting, the expansion of the Black imagination through its characters, and the possibilities Afrofuturistic worldbuilding represents are all available for synthesis. The encouragement is for there to be more exploration of Afrofuturism and Black futurity found in the playwriting and performance of Black Theater and utilizing the findings as an entry point to the Black Radical Tradition. The further encouragement here is to use Black Studies' critical and liberatory curiosity as the vehicle to reach the destination.

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[27] Jon N. Hale, *The Freedom Schools: Student Activists in the Mississippi Civil Rights Movement (*New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), 115-116.

[28] Christina Lorocco, "COFO Is Not Godot: The Free Southern Theater, The Black Freedom Movement, and the Search for a Usable Aesthetic," *Cultural & Social History* 12, no. 4 (2015), 509–526, http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14780038.2015.1088260.

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