

A Review of Afrofuturism: A History of Black Futures

Edited by Kevin M. Strait and Kinshasha Holman.

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The tip-toeing opening bass line on “*P-Funk*” by Parliament-Funkadelic always makes me feel like I am stepping into a new realm whenever I listen to it. It reminds me of being a child and slowly walking to the basement where my family kept their coveted record collection. Whether I was going to find Donny Hathaway’s *This Christmas* for my grandmother while she cooked Christmas dinner or sneak a quick peek at an adult-themed album cover, I knew I was journeying into a special, if not sacred, space for the grown-ups. I didn’t know the word Afrofuturism, as the term wasn’t coined until 1994 when Mark Dery published his seminal essay *Black to the Future*, and I certainly didn’t know its depth, but I did know the funk and that it was about freedom, expression, and far-out notions of joy.

That haunting bass line is what I heard in my mind as I cracked the spine on *Afrofuturism: A History of Black Futures*. This astounding work has been designed as part primer and part textual archive and companion for the Smithsonian’s National Museum for African American History and Culture (NMAAHC)’s exhibit of the same name. It features over 100 stunning photographs and illustrations—many of which are currently on display within the exhibit. It also includes more than twenty thought-provoking essays from highly regarded Afrofuturists that broaden understandings of Afrofuturism as it continues to evolve within and across multiple genres and generations.

Afrofuturism’s generally agreed upon tenets of liberation, autonomy, imagination and freedom without Earthly limits, especially humanly constructed ideas of race, are reiterated throughout the book. The forward and introduction, written by Kevin Young and Kevin Strait, NMAAHC Director and Afrofuturism exhibit curator, respectively, seek to set every reader out on the same footing. More than just the implied definition within the word itself, Young writes that “Afrofuturism was often about how the past thought about the future, and how African Americans dreamed of worlds they wished to occupy and soon brought into being” (p. 8). Strait traces the modern-day lineage of Afrofuturism from Dery’s essay and conversations with author Samuel Delaney and the late, and very much revered, critic, and musician, Greg Tate to the pioneering sociologist Alondra Nelson with her online listserv, Afrofuturism.net, in 1998. She, along with multimedia artist Paul D. Miller and many more, created a safe space for Afrofuturists to convene and nurture their genius. Strait also links contemporary branches of Afrofuturism to George Clinton and his “tangible manifestation of Afrofuturism and the

liberating power and autonomous promise with [his] art” (p. 13). It doesn’t matter if you’re a tip-toeing newbie or someone who’s had access to the mothership since you can remember, Strait reminds us that “African Americans have always reimagined the past and reexamined the present in order to redetermine the future” (p. 10).

This book is divided into four chapters: *Space is the Place*, *Speculative Worlds*, *Visualizing Afrofuturism*, and *Musical Futures*. Each chapter contains four to six essays that delineate the scope of Afrofuturism’s reach and influence in different facets of culture. Each chapter begins with a captivating image to focus your attention and perspective on the pages ahead. Then, each proceeding essay starts with its own powerful image or two to visually prepare the reader for a deeper dive into the fantastic. Additional artwork punctuates the ends of each essay and there are in-depth captions that accompany each photo.

Ytasha Womack guides us through the first chapter’s frontier: *Space*. She shares a similar yet much richer experience than my mine about her family’s basement safe haven and magical musical wonderland and how it opened her up to “a unique grammar in the world, a specialized conjugation of sight, sound, motion and energy- worlds that can be described as Afrofuturistic” (p. 21). Beyond the reaches of Earth is a brilliant way to begin this escapade. Womack encourages a list of music, literature, spiritual, and visual arts in which to indulge as we learn how Afrofuturism and its elements have always permeated every space of our existence. We are even asked to trouble ideas such as race as “technology” (p. 27) and a “skin color-coded system of organizing humans” (p. 27). As an award-winning graphic novelist, author, Prof. John Jennings ponders in his Chapter 2 essay, *We Are the Stars*, “...when we write about race, are we really writing about a type of science fiction?” (p. 66). We also learn about the rediscovered artistic works of W. E. B. Du Bois, the prophetic and recently recharting fiction of Octavia Butler, the countless struggles of pioneer graphic novelists, and the global importance of the cinema blockbuster film, *Black Panther*.

The photographs and essays in the book offer us bridges of understanding between genres and modes of expression as our art and existences evolve. For example, one might think that *Black Panther* was the quintessential cinematic representation of Afrofuturism. Yet, essayist and author, Herb Boyd asserts in Chapter 2 that, “Wakanda needs a do-over, a fresh reimagining that quashes class differences, obliterates gender disparity, and engages in a kind of socialism that equally distributes wealth” (p. 102). These writings are as intellectually stimulating as the photos are emotionally stirring. Awe-inspiring photographs of Grace Jones and Sun Ra and the Arkestra share binding with collage work of Krista Franklin, a sample comic strip of the first African American woman cartoonist, Jackie Ormes, portraiture by the late Kwame Braithwaite, graphs created by W. E. B. Du Bois, and concert documentation of (inter)stellar performances could easily stand alone as a photo publication about Afrofuturism’s storied and beloved past and promising trajectory.

Afrofuturistic dreams and notions become vividly illustrated, clothed, and scored in the second half of the book as Eve Ewing writes, in Chapter 3, about “the power of immediacy” (p. 115) that the culture can deliver visually. She interrogates the works of artists like Kenyan filmmaker Wanuri Kahiu (*Pumzi*, 2009) who offer us more than metallics and shiny objects to envision our futures. Although evolution isn’t just about style, what would *Black Panther* be without the costuming of two-time Academy Award winner Ruth Carter? Would impressions of the performances of LaBelle be the same without the silvery space-inspired suit of Nona Hendryx and, as Mark Anthony Neal posits, their “critique of the idea of the ‘girl groups’ of the 1960s” (p. 159)? Could Outkast as *ATLiens* move their crowds without the unpredictable flair of the evolution of Andre 3000? Would we have as rich a context for Janelle Monae’s *ArchAndroid* turn without the music and cinematic inspiration of Sun Ra? All the artists highlighted in the book and within the exhibit have contributed to Afrofuturist literature and/or performance in a multitude of ways. Their art breathes life into multi-dimensions on the page. It lives forever in film and aurally with your musical medium of choice. It is celebrated and given wings on concert stages. Still, readers are left to question: what about theater?

Midway through the book there is a stunning picture of two women mid-dance, skirts twirling, and smiles spread as wide as the imagination. A quick glance immediately identifies it as a still from Ntozake Shange’s 1976 Broadway production *for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf*. It is the *only* still photo in the book from a dramatic theatrical production from *any* stage. Why are theater arts seemingly overlooked as a frontier of Afrofuturism? Theatre doesn’t have the permanence of film, but it is often born of literature. Scripts are often speculative. Theatre artists take our imaginations from the page to the stage; from the brilliant secret collective to the world; from creative cipher to touring ensemble. What is a live performance without imaginative set design and costuming? Theatrical soundscapes alone work to transport creatives and audience members to worlds outside of their own imaginings. This omission is unfortunate because theater melds all elements of performance together.

There *are* a few musical performances highlighted in the publication. Chapter 4 titled *Musical Futures* takes the readers back to various times in different genres of music where the glimpses into the future are sung from the heart and seared into electric guitar strings. The spectacle of Parliament-Funkadelic shows is referenced again for their costume designs by Larry LeGaspi. LeGaspi is also known for his space-inspired costume work with LaBelle. In the essay, *The Nubians of Plutonia: Ancient Futures in the Music of Sun Ra*, the theatricality of Sun Ra and his Arkestra are acknowledged for their work with ancient Egyptian symbols and future sound projections in their performances. However, Nona Hendryx’s *Afrofuturism: A Design for Living* and Angela Tate’s *The Gendered Contours of Afrofuturism* remind the reader to consider the importance of Black women when defining the scope, power, and importance of Afrofuturism. Hendryx acknowledges Black and Brown women innovators while maintaining her rightful

position as pioneer and provocateur with her “SoundPlays” (p. 180) and fusion of various technologies. Tate sees race and gender as obstacles that continue to hinder people from fully accepting the forward-focused contributions of Black women—even in Afrofuturism (p. 187).

There are hopeful avenues of expression for all genders within the current innovations of Afrofuturism. Digital platforms and marketplaces like *web3* are fostering spaces for Black creatives to “flow through digital, physical and immersive worlds to create lineages between past and future communities and movements” (p. 151). As explained by De Nichols in *One the Third Day: Black Artistry, Activism and Community in the Web3 Future*, emerging digital spaces are creating “places where the inequities of the past are but a distant memory, and where we can forge, literally, new possibilities free from the encumbrances and gatekeepers of the present” (p. 151). The future is undoubtedly digital, and this new publication leaves one inspired to see how Afrofuturism will continue to root and blossom in emerging technologies.

Before the extensive suggested reading and further viewing lists at the end of the book, in the afterword, Alondra Nelson offers that “Afrofuturism is an infrastructure for the imagination. It is a blueprint for mapping and for building the world anew, a cosmos aspired to generation after generation- a gestalt” (p. 199). She suggests that all elements of creativity from diasporic peoples meld together to form newly imagined worlds and ways of being. Afrofuturism is many things. It is escapism and the reality of lived circumstances. It is enlightenment and hedonism. It is within, around, above, and below. Afrofuturism is all-inclusive of the past, the present, and the beyond. It is a powerful cultural tool for upliftment. At a time where space travel is now literal and seems to have billionaire status as a prerequisite, this book proves that Black people have been beyond time and space and bent them to our liking to return over the course of many generations and lifetimes to write, sing, and shout about it. *Afrofuturism: A History of Black Futures* is a definitive assertion that we will continue to do so. It whets the palate for the current companion exhibit if only to be able to stand in a singular Earthly space that holds Octavia Butler's typewriter, T'Challa's *Black Panther* suit, Sun Ra's harp, Lt. Uhura's uniform, Trayvon Martin's youth space camp suit, and Parliament-Funkadelic's *The Mothership*.

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