From the Desk of the Editor-In-Chief

Introduction to the Black Theatre Review, Afrofuturism

We are in a moment where Afrofuturism is once again an explicit refrain in the public consciousness, but we are clear that Black people have been future oriented since Ògún charted a pathway from heaven to earth for the rest of the Irunmole to follow. Be that as it may, *tBTR* is excited to contribute to this popular conversation on Afrofuturism with Vol. 2.1. In March, the National Museum of African American History and Culture published *Afrofuturism: A History of Black Futures* a beautifully illustrated and analytical journey through the Black imagination, to support its exhibit of the same title which runs through March 2024. This timing of this volume is also congruent with the upcoming 37th Black Theatre Network Conference on Afrofuturism, "Envisioning Black Theatre."

Among the many intellectual and creative opportunities for engaging the theme, we invited authors to:

- uncover histories and probe new legacies;
- investigate the ways Afrofuturistic expressivity has historically looked forward to and engaged the possibilities for the future;
- explore plays, productions, graphic novels, online content, and film/TV with dramaturgies situated between realism and speculation;
- wrestle with the ways in which Afrofuturism expands the boundaries of the Black imagination;
- examine the possibilities of Black speculative fiction to provide an escape from racism, anti-Blackness, and the trauma of white supremacy; and
- consider the ways in which Afrofuturism engenders joy and hope.

In the desire to see truly Black theatre and the hope for more of its kind, last year, I made the trek to Washington D.C. to witness Jordan E. Cooper's *Ain't No More* at the Woolly Mammoth, just before it headed to Broadway's Belasco Theatre. Though fictional, bearing witness to the United States' repatriation of the descendants of enslaved Africans to Africa (as well as ALL of our stolen cultural wealth) was an experience that was worth the three hour drive and the hassle of traffic. The lifting of this performance to Broadway stages gave me hope for the future directions of this form in spaces that were not originally designed with Black folk in mind. Unfortunately, we all saw how short lived the unapologetically Black work survived on the Great White Way. Despite the early closing of this beautiful show and the return to business practices as usual across U.S. regional theatres (even as seasons are halted or theatres close altogether), I

still hold tight to the idea that under supportive conditions, Black expressivity can and should have an opportunity to thrive in foreign territories. From the profession to the academy, Black people deserve to see the possibilities for their meaningful participation in every theatre, classroom, and journal we choose to be part of.

Right after witnessing *Ain't No More*, I began organizing a private screening of *Black Panther: Wakanda Forever* for my family and friends. Amidst the rise in popularity of streaming and the irregularity with which many of us were visiting the seeing place, civic gatherings within the theatre still matter. Andre De Shields told us that, "Theatre is the way to life."[1] When we gather in the dark of the theatre our humanity and potentiality are affirmed. And when we emerge into the light of realization, and lay eyes on one another once again, we are reminded that we must treat each other better. In response to the charge to "adorn ourselves appropriately for these proceedings,"[2] my cousin, Nekesha, designed white t-shirts and sweatshirts embellished with a gold bifurcation of Chadwick Boseman's face and his Black Panther mask. Attending family members were distinguished from friends by "Dottie's Crew" imprinted on the left sleeve of their shirt to the rejection of friends who declared that they were blood relations after twenty plus years of friendship. At most of my maternal family gatherings we find ways to lift-up the name and presence of my grandmother, Dorothy ("Dottie") Minor, within the consciousness of the collective. As I consider the means by which her "crew" of descendants continue to venerate her—most often through the technology of dress—I am reminded of how central the calabash of Black maternity is to Black futurity. We are all the dreams, hopes, and futures of our grandmothers. A few weeks later, during our weeklong Kwanzaa Celebration, many of us who attended *Wakanda Forever*, made plans to go see August Wilson's *The Piano Lesson* at the Barrymore. We bore witness to Black speculation at the intersection of memory, speech, and performance. Every one of us was moved as we listened to Berniece bring forth the power of Black maternity as she called down her family's foremothers, Mama Berniece, Mama Esther, and Mama Ola, no doubt changing the future for Maretha, as she shifted her own and that of Boy Willie.

With these experiences in mind, I reflect on Vol. 2.1. This issue opens with "Black Theater, Black Studies, and Afrofuturism: An Exploration of Past Present and Future" by Leslie K. Etienne. In this transdisciplinary analysis, he argues that Black Theater (and he spells it with -er) and performance is the interpretation and chronicling of Black Studies that brings forth its "boldness," and that "Afrofuturism helps Black Studies to conceptualize an analysis of futurity through the lens of the Black experience." Etienne sees the discipline as a critical component of Black Studies, connecting the form to the Black Freedom and Black Power Movements, and

[1] De Shields, Andre. 2021. "Andre De Shields and Haarlem Nocturne" in Home with Crossroads Theatre. Accessed February 1. https://www.crossroadstheatrecompany.org/at-home/projects/haarlem-nocturne.

[2] Bryant, Anthony **(**@canthonybryant**).** 2022. "Attire for our Wakandan Homecoming. November 11, 2022." Twitter, July 25, 2022, 4:13pm. https://twitter.com/canthonybryant/status/1551661972072062979?s=46&t=d1gj6MoVQYObA7gALX3_2w.

reminding readers that Black Theater is a form of social protest, an act of cultural and systemic resistance, and a means to (re)envisioning present realities and the future. His re-affirmation of Black Theater's roots within the larger intellectual tradition of Black Studies should empower every Black Theater and African American Theatre scholar to seek formal joint appointments with Africana Studies programs across the nation and encourage Theatre Departments to meaningfully and sustainably align themselves with units in Interdisciplinary Studies.

Etienne is followed by Isiah Lavender III's "Incendiary Dramas: Black Theatre Classics and Afrofuturism." Lavender explores how some of the most provocative classics in Black Theatre (and he spells it with -re) between 1959 and 1983 envisioned a brighter future through creating "emancipatory mindscapes." His analysis, framed by acts of vanishing, begins with Douglas Turner Wards' *Day of Absence* and ends with Lynn Nottages' *Poof*. From the sudden disappearance of Black folk to the spontaneous combustion of an abusive husband, Lavender explores the impact of White oppression and intracommunal and patriarchal oppression on a futuristic outlook for America's "alien and alienated."

The idea that theatre provides a space to witness repeated patterns of history and to prophesy on future possibilities for humanity is a thread which ties Lavender's work to that of D. A-R. Forbes-Erickson, author of "'The Running 'Black Man': An Afro-Dystopian Praxis in Directing Jackie Sibblies Drury's *We are Proud to Present a Presentation About the Herero of Namibia, Formerly Known as Southwest Africa, From the German Südwestafrika, Between the Years 1884–1915.*" With its unfortunate timelessness—the parallels between the Herero and Namaqua genocide in present day Namibia and ongoing "'spectacular' lynching events in the United States,"—Forbes-Erickson first contextualizes Drury's play within a hundred years of lynching dramas or what she describes as Afro-dystopias. She then discusses her direction of *We are Proud to Present* for the Sacramento State University Theatre, staged via Zoom during the dual pandemics of COVID-19 and racialized violence, and her application of digital media to historicize and challenge the legacy of lynching, and refrain from re-traumatizing performers and audiences.

Like Forbes-Erickson, Azeez Akinwumi Sesan reviews history in his revisionist reading of Toyin Abiodun's *The Trials of Àfọ̀njá*. In his essay, Sesan explores Abiodun's dramatization of the tensions between the Alaafin of Oyo, Aole, and the Aare Ona Kakanfo (the war Generalissimo), Àfọ̀njá, and how the Fulani came to control Ilorin, a border town of Oyo State. Sesan's position is that Abiodun exhumes "deep-structure marginal facts and fictions based on the principles of causality, convergences and divergences." What is consistent with history is Àfọ̀njá's temperament and heroics. However, in Sesan's estimation, Abiodun re-reads Yorùbá history through his dramatic deconstruction of popular understanding of Àfọ̀njá's death, through his dramatization of the speculative (i.e. metaphysical) aspects of Àfọ̀njá's dethroning, his pact

with the Ìyàmí.[3] It is this interplay of power between Àfọ̀njá and the Ìyàmí in the marketplace (also considered a metaphysical space in Yorùbá cosmology), that is a significant contributing factor to the future rise of the Fulani Emirate System—this, and the fact that the first Emir is a biological son to Àfọ̀njá. Though focused on an African historical drama, Sesan's analysis of Abiodun's dramaturgy underscores a point made earlier by Etienne, that "Afrofuturism does not discount Black history, in fact, 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."

While the performance reviews per se do not address Afrofuturism perspiciously, aesthetics of the genre are evident across the individual plays considered herein. Zachary Price reviews August Wilson's Pulitzer Prize winning work, *The Piano Lesson* at the Barrymore Theatre (directed by LaTanya Richardson Jackson). Bryan Schmidt reviews Donja R. Love's *Sugar in Our Wounds* at Penumbra Theatre (directed by Sarah Bellamy), and as many of the authors ahead of him in this issue, Dave Peterson invokes Lorraine Hansberry in his review of *The Sign in Sidney Brustein's Window* at the Brooklyn Academy of Music (directed by Anne Kauffman). We are also pleased to include book reviews by Concetta A. Williams and N. LaQuis Harkins on *Afrofuturism in Black Panther: Gender, Identity, and the Re-Making of Blackness* (2021) and *Afrofuturism: The History of Black Futures* (2023), respectively.

What distinguishes this issue from previous editions is the element of digital art. In the spirit exploring future possibilities for more enhanced media dynamism within our e-journal as we originally envisioned, we offer the work of Kamau Grantham, Christopher Kinson, and Stacey A. Robinson, otherwise known as bla(CK)mau. They describe their digital art contribution to this volume, *bla(CK)mau Xperience*, as a "sound and video collage" of history, the contemporary, and the future, and "bla(CK)mau-isms." At the center of this work is Keisha, who travels through the nearly conflated gap between time and space to meet others—Barbara Ann Teer, George Clinton, and A Tribe Called Quest—at the crossroads of Earth and Mars. It's a digital conjuring of funk and Afro-cosmological intercourse—the subtle conversation between Ọ̀ṣun and Ògún is not lost on me—that engages almost every sense except smell, unless it's your own because you've worked up a sweat in the five minutes of dancing, you're likely to be doing.

As always, enjoy this offering, our intellectual and creative contribution to the never-ending effort to lift-up and showcase the depth and genius of Black expressivity. As if we needed one more reminder that the movement for Black freedom never pauses, the U.S. Supreme Court's revocation of the use of Affirmative Action, emphasizes the importance of the sustainable support and resourcing of Black institutions. Thus, we thank every contributor and every reviewer bold and free enough to join us in cementing the presence and future of *tBTR* in the field. We are and will be because of your willingness and generosity.

[3] What I refer to as the Ìyàmí, Sesan refers to as the witches. I take my cues on the linguistic construct of witch from the work of Teresa Washington's, *Our Mothers, Our Powers, Our Texts* (2005).

In the words of Funkadelic, "Feet don't fail me now."[4] We should continue to let nothing stop us. Onwards and upwards.

—Omiyẹmi (Artisia) Green

[4] "One Nation Under a Groove," Track #1, Funkadelic, One Nation Under a Groove, Warner Brothers, 1978.