

Afrofuturism, Science Fiction, and the History of the Future

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In his introduction to the 1989 re-issue of *Invisible Man* Ralph Ellison provocatively notes, “a piece of science fiction is the last thing I expected to write” (xv). Both this claim and the way Ellison phrases it are striking. Literary scholars usually talk about *Invisible Man* as a prime example of the Great American Novel, but throughout his career Ellison carefully distanced himself from that phrase. Indeed, when he accepted the National Book Award for this work in 1953 he rather cheerfully described it as a *failed example* of the Great American Novel. But Ellison does not just flip the script and call *Invisible Man* a work of science fiction either – at most he implies that there is something fantastic about it. Thus it seems that Ellison could not make sense of his own novel because he did not have a name for a literature predicated upon both realist and speculative modes of storytelling.

Recently, however, artists and scholars have indeed coined a name for this kind of storytelling: Afrofuturism. Over the past three decades both science fiction and Afrodiasporic scholars have become increasingly interested in what Sheree R. Thomas calls “speculative fiction from the African diaspora.” Leading science fiction journals such as *Extrapolation* and *Science Fiction Studies* regularly include essays about black authors in their pages, and as early as the summer of 1984, *Black American Literature Forum* devoted an entire special issue to the subject of race in science fiction. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, however, there was little discussion of this fiction as a literary mode with its own distinct themes, techniques, and relations to other kinds of black cultural production.

This situation changed with the emergence of Afrofuturist studies in the 1990s, when cultural critics including Mark Dery, Greg Tate, Tricia Rose, and Kodwo Eshun first drew attention to the centrality of science fiction themes and techniques in the work of many black authors, artists, and musicians. The term is generally credited to Dery, who, in his 1994 edited collection *Flame Wars: The Discourse of*

Cyberculture, introduces the term “Afrofuturism” to define “speculative fiction that treats African-American themes and addresses African-American concerns in the context of 20th-century technoculture – and more generally, African-American signification that appropriates images of technology and a prosthetically enhanced future” to explore how people of color negotiate life in a technology intensive world (136). As the first part of Dery’s definition suggests, Afrofuturism is closely related to science fiction as an aesthetic genre; indeed, contemporary authors whom critics such as Dery, Tate and Rose identify as Afrofuturist (e.g. Samuel R. Delany, Octavia Butler, and Nalo Hopkinson) explicitly identify themselves as science fiction authors. However, as Dery argues in the second half of his definition, Afrofuturism is not only a subgenre of science fiction. Instead, it is a larger aesthetic mode that encompasses a diverse range of artists working in different genres and media who are united by their shared interest in projecting black futures derived from Afrodiasporic experiences.

More recently, sociologist Alondra Nelson has been instrumental in developing Afrofuturism as a coherent mode of critical inquiry. According to Nelson, the task of the Afrofuturist scholar is to “explore futurist themes in black cultural production and the ways in which technological innovation is changing the face of black art and culture” (Nelson and Miller 2006). Because this kind of cultural production crosses conventional aesthetic boundaries (including the hypothetical boundaries between canonical and popular culture), Afrofuturist scholars must be prepared to work both within and without the academy. And indeed, Nelson’s own work on Afrofuturism does just that. In 1998 Nelson and multimedia artist Paul D. Miller created the Afrofuturist listserve (which includes scholars, musicians, authors, and artists) and in 2000 they launched www.Afrofuturism.net. In 2002, Nelson introduced her group’s work to academia with a special issue of *Social Text*, which demonstrated how the insights generated by members of the Afrofuturist listserve could open up new areas of scholarly inquiry.

This new critical perspective enables us to understand Afrofuturism as a coherent narrative tradition in its own right. Sheree R. Thomas’s *Dark Matter: A Century of Speculative Fiction from the African Diaspora* (2000) and *Dark Matter: Reading the Bones* (2004) have introduced readers to stories from dozens of African American authors ranging from Charles W. Chesnutt and W.E.B. Du Bois to Samuel Delany and Amiri Baraka. Nalo Hopkinson’s *Whispers from the Cotton Tree Root: Caribbean Fabulist Fiction* (2000) introduces readers to the more global dimensions of Afrofuturism through

stories by well-known Caribbean authors including Jamaica Kincaid and Wilson Harris as well as tales from newcomers including Tobias S. Buckell and Marcia Douglas. Taken together, then, these anthologies demonstrate how literary Afrofuturism has developed across both time and space – and both within and without the science fiction tradition.

But of course one of the primary ways that artists project black futures in writing is by adopting the tropes and narrative techniques of science fiction or by writing from an Afrodiasporic perspective from within the science fiction community. Accordingly, in this essay I specifically explore how Afrofuturist literature has developed over the past century in tandem with science fiction. After briefly reviewing the history and aesthetic mission of Afrofuturism I consider what I see as one of the central texts of literary Afrofuturism: Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*. Here, I will examine how Ellison uses science fictional motifs to aggressively critique American institutions and practices that erase black people and their history from the future imaginary. In the second half of this essay I discuss a series Afrofuturist stories written between 1920 and the present that restore people of color to this future imaginary. I am particularly interested in demonstrating how these stories follow a specific historical trajectory. While early Afrofuturists were concerned primarily with the question of whether or not there will be any future whatsoever for people of color, contemporary Afrofuturists assume that in the future race will continue to matter to individuals and entire civilizations alike. In doing so, they expand our sense of the possible and contribute to the ongoing development of science fiction itself.

A brief history of Afrofuturism

The history of Afrofuturist storytelling both parallels and intersects that of science fiction. Science fiction scholars generally agree that science fiction developed from the scientifically- and technologically-inspired stories of classic 19th-century authors including Mary Shelley and H.G. Wells in Great Britain, Jules Verne in France, and Edgar Allan Poe and Nathaniel Hawthorne in the United States.¹ In essence, these authors updated older, well-established story forms – including the

1. For discussions of 19th-century British and continental influences on the development of science fiction, see especially Aldiss and Wingrove (1986) and James (1994). For discussions of 19th-century American authors on the development of this genre, see Atterbery (2002) and Franklin (1995). Finally, for more specific considerations of Mary Shelley's legacy to women science fiction writers, see Lefanu (1988), Roberts (1993), and Donawerth (1997).

gothic, the fantastic journey, and utopian fiction – with detailed references to modern scientific theories and technological developments. In doing so they took the first important steps in creating a new mode of speculative literature that directly engaged the changing relations of science and society as a whole.

Afrofuturist stories also begin to appear in this period, and, more often than not, were also written by respectable mainstream writers including African Americans Martin Delany, Charles Chesnutt, and Edward Johnson. Much like their white counterparts, 19th-century Afrofuturists wrote in a diverse range of fantastic and proto-science fictional forms. For example, Delany's 1857 novel *Blake, or the Huts of America* is an alternate history novel in which Cuban and American slaves engineer a successful revolution; Chesnutt's 1887 short story "The Goophered Grapevine" combines elements of gothic and trickster narratives to examine the relations of northern whites and southern blacks; and Johnson's 1904 novel *Light Ahead for the Negro* depicts an African American man who travels into the future and explores a racially-egalitarian socialist America (Delany 2000: 383f). Whatever narrative forms they worked in, then, 19th-century Afrofuturist authors were bound together by a shared interest in representing the changing relations of science and society as they specifically pertained to African American history – including, of course, the history of the future.

Although American science fiction evolved into a distinct genre replete with its own authors, editors, and magazines in the first decades of the 20th century, Afrofuturist authors of this period were still more likely to publish in black magazines and newspapers such as *Crisis* and the *Pittsburgh Courier*. Of course, this does not mean that there were not any black science fiction authors – since science fiction magazines such as *Amazing* and *Astounding Stories* carried out most of their business by mail, it would have been impossible to determine the race (or even gender) of any individual authors unless they announced it publicly. What it does mean, however, is that authors associated with these magazines generally did not write stories that addressed racial issues in meaningful ways (Delany 2000: 384).²

2. There were, of course, a few exceptions to this rule. In a 1997 interview, Leslie F. Stone – one of the first women to publish in the new science fiction magazines of the early 20th century – notes that her popular story "The Fall of Mercury" (1935) featured a black protagonist. Significantly, however, she also notes that to the best of her knowledge neither her editors nor her readers ever commented on this one way or another. Thus it might be more accurate to say that science fiction authors sometimes imagined futures that included people of color, but not ones that extrapolated from the racial

There seem to have been two broad reasons for this silence. The first has to do with the cultural status of science fiction in America at that time. Because early American science fiction magazines were made of cheap pulp paper featuring crudely drawn images of exploding planets, scantily-clad women, and bug-eyed monsters, they were often perceived as somewhat immature and disreputable (James 1994: 37). As such, they were hardly ideal forums for authors interested in serious speculation about the future of race in America.

The second reason is more directly political. While individual members of the science fiction community were often advocates of civil rights, science fiction storytelling as a whole tended to revolve around futures that were implicitly – and sometimes explicitly – racist ones. Consider, for instance, Stanley G. Weinbaum's "A Martian Odyssey" (1934). This story holds a special place in science fiction history because it is one of the first sympathetic depictions of the alien other, emphasizing the intellectual similarities between technologically advanced humans and aliens over their obvious physical differences. Unfortunately, it does so in a spectacularly racist manner: the predominantly white humans who populate 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 back on Earth*. Even at their literary best, then, early science fiction authors seemed incapable of writing stories about tomorrow that did anything other than reflect the prejudices of the current day.³

After World War II, new sciences and technologies including everything from the atom bomb to the automatic coffeemaker seemed to propel Americans into a brave new future that would be radically different from the past. Not surprisingly, science fiction became an increasingly popular – and increasingly respectable – way to make sense of these changes. Although Afrofuturists still

tensions of their own day. Instead, they seem to have implicitly assumed that such tensions would be eliminated in rationally-planned worlds of tomorrow.

3. For further discussion, see Delany's "Racism and Science Fiction" (2000) and Thomas's introduction to *Dark Matter* (2000). Indeed, as Thomas notes, this trend continued well into the 1950s, when well-meaning science fiction writers like Ray Bradbury wrote allegorical stories about the civil rights movement that only addressed race relations from the perspective of white characters. Although such stories were in some ways a marked improvement over their pulp-era predecessors, they still rendered black people silent and relegated them to the margins of social and political action.

did not have much formal contact with the science fiction community in the postwar era, their storytelling practices became an increasingly central aspect of another popular art form: jazz music. Indeed, many Americans first encountered what we now call Afrofuturism in the work of 1940s, 1950s, and early 1960s jazz musicians such as Sun Ra and Lee “Scratch” Perry, who depicted themselves (and by extension all Afrodiasporic people) as the descendants of aliens who came to Earth to prepare humanity for its eventual destiny among the stars. Thus these artists projected noble pasts for people of color while carefully crafting a heroic black face for the future as well. Eventually, Afrofuturist storytelling became a regular aspect of black popular music, informing the work of funk musicians such as George Clinton in the 1970s, rap artists such as Public Enemy in the 1980s, and techno DJs such as Spooky: That Subliminal Kid in the 1990s and 2000s.⁴

As the explosion in Afrofuturist music over the past 40 years suggests, science fiction has woven itself into the fabric of everyday life. Indeed, scholars including Darko Suvin and Fredric Jameson sometimes even talk about science fiction as “THE literature of late capitalism” because it so effectively captures the experience of living in a high-tech world (Yaszek 2002: 97).⁵ If nothing else, films including *The Matrix* from America, *Tetsuo: The Iron Man* from Japan, and *Night Watch* from Russia indicate the very real extent to which science fiction pervades global culture.

It is perhaps not surprising, then, that Afrofuturist authors increasingly ally themselves with the science fiction community. These new alliances began in the 1960s and 1970s with pioneering black authors such as Samuel Delany, Octavia Butler, Charles Saunders, and Jewelle Gomez. Today, this community is home to dozens if not hundreds of black authors from around the world. And indeed, science fiction and Afrofuturism have come together in a number of other ways: through the rise of conferences such as *Black to the Future*, the publication of books such as Thomas’s

4. For detailed discussion of Afrofuturism in jazz and other popular forms of Afrodiasporic music, see especially Kodwo Eshun’s groundbreaking book *More Brilliant than the Sun* (1999) and John Akomfrah’s equally groundbreaking film *The Last Angel of History* (1995).

5. See especially Suvin (1989) and the discussion of science fiction in Jameson (1991 and 2005 [the latter reviewed in this issue]). Although both authors are primarily interested in the science fiction subgenre of cyberpunk, their comments are relevant to much of science fiction in general.

Dark Matter anthologies, and the establishment of author collectives such as the Carl Brandon Society.⁶

Afrofuturism has evolved into a coherent mode not only aesthetically but also in terms of its political mission. In its broadest dimensions Afrofuturism is an extension of the historical recovery projects that black Atlantic intellectuals have engaged in for well over 200 years. According to author Toni Morrison, these projects do more than simply combat the erasure of black subjects from Western history. They also demonstrate how African slaves and their descendants experienced conditions of homelessness, alienation, and dislocation that anticipate what philosophers like Nietzsche describe as the founding conditions of modernity (see Gilroy 1993: 178). Thus Afrodiasporic histories insist both on the authenticity of the black subject's experience in Western history and the way this experience embodies the dislocation felt by many modern peoples.

As a popular aesthetic movement centered on seemingly fantastic tropes such as "the encounter with the alien other" and "travel through time and space," Afrofuturism holds the potential to bring the Afrodiasporic experience to life in new ways. As Alondra Nelson explains, the science fictional elements of Afrofuturism provide both "apt metaphors for black life and history" and inspiration for "technical and creative innovations" of artists working in a variety of traditional and new media.⁷ Furthermore, by harnessing one of the signature languages of modernity – the language of science fiction – Afrofuturist artists automatically create new audiences for their stories: those primarily young, white, Western, and middle-class men who comprise the majority of science fiction fans and who might never otherwise learn much about the history of their country save what they haphazardly pick up in the high school classroom.

As its name implies, Afrofuturism is not just about reclaiming the history of the past, but about reclaiming the history of the future as well. Cultural critic Kodwo Eshun proposes that mainstream understandings and representations of the future derive from three closely related sources. These sources include big science, which generates data about the past and the present in order to predict the future; big business, which funds scientific research and acts upon its results; and the global media, which synthesizes scientific and corporate activity into a relatively coherent narrative and then disseminates

6. For more information about Black to the Future, see the conference website at <http://cdforum.org/btff/>. On the Carl Brandon Society, go to <http://www.carlbrandon.org/>.
7. <http://www.afrofuturism.net/text/about.html>.

this narrative throughout the world. Together, these institutions constitute what Eshun calls the “futures industry.” More often than not, the agents of this *über*-industry conflate blackness with catastrophe. For example, Eshun writes that “African social reality is overdetermined by intimidating global scenarios, doomsday economic projections, weather predictions, medical reports on AIDS, and life-expectancy forecasts, all of which predict decades of immiserization” (2003: 291f). Other places populated by descendants of the African diaspora – such as the Caribbean islands and the inner cities of North America – receive similar treatment in futurist scenarios. As such they become sites of absolute dystopia; imaginary spaces where the persistence of black identity signifies a disastrous failure in the ongoing progress of global capital itself.

Afrofuturist artists fight these dystopic futures in two related ways. First, they use the vocabulary of science fiction to demonstrate how black alienation – what W.E.B. Du Bois called “double consciousness” – is exacerbated rather than alleviated by those visions of tomorrow that are disseminated by the futures industry. Second, they disrupt, challenge, and otherwise transform those futures with fantastic stories that, as Ruth Mayer puts it, “move seamlessly back and forth through time and space, between cultural traditions and geographic time zones” – and thus between blackness as a dystopic relic of the past and as a harbinger of a new and more promising alien future (2000: 556). These acts of “chronopolitical intervention,” as Eshun calls them, double, triple, quadruple, and even quintuple our consciousness about what it might mean to live in a black future (2003: 298).

Fighting the futures industry: Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*

Although Afrofuturism, like science fiction, has developed over the course of two centuries, I begin my own history of this aesthetic tradition in the middle of the 20th century with Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*. Ellison’s novel is a particularly compelling example of Afrofuturism because it invites readers to think about how the rhetoric of the futures industry impacts people of color. As readers are likely to remember, *Invisible Man* follows the adventures of an unnamed protagonist who tries to become an American leader by allying himself with various organizations: the historic black college he attends as a young man in the South, the paint factory he works for when he first moves north, and then finally the leftist political group known as the Brotherhood.

As I read Ellison's novel in the history of Afrofuturism, what the invisible man is looking for is the possibility of a black future that he cannot find.⁸ In each case his dreams of self-realization are thwarted because he is treated as little more than a blank slate upon which institutional authority projects its own vision of the future. The most explicit acknowledgement of this comes from Mr. Norton, the rich white college trustee who tells Ellison's protagonist: "You are my fate, young man. Only you can tell me what it really is . . . Through you . . . I can observe in terms of living personalities to what extent my money, my time and my hopes have been fruitfully invested" (42, 45). Here then the black subject is figured as venture capital, a natural resource available to white investors speculating in the stock market of tomorrow.

Although white members of the Brotherhood explicitly oppose themselves to capitalists like Norton, they, too, treat black men as natural resources rather than human beings. This attitude is clearly encapsulated in a Brotherhood poster entitled "After the Struggle: The Rainbow of America's Future." The poster depicts "a group of heroic figures. An American Indian couple, representing the dispossessed past; a blond brother (in overalls) and a leading Irish sister, representing the dispossessed present; and [black] Brother Tod Clifton and a young white couple (it had been felt unwise simply to show Clifton and the girl) surrounded by a group of children of mixed races, representing the future" (385). Much like Norton then, the Brotherhood equates blackness with futurity, but only insofar as the black subject conforms to a predictable and carefully controlled vision of the future.

Eventually Ellison's protagonist learns to say no to these white-washed histories of the future predicated on the erasure of black subjectivity. He learns this lesson from Brother Tarp. As a young man in the South, Tarp refuses to give up his possessions to a white man; later, he refuses to accept the sentence of life imprisonment he receives for doing so, and after 19 years of patient waiting, he finds his opportunity and escapes to the North. As he tells the invisible man: "I said no to a man who wanted to take something from me; that's what it cost me for saying no and even now the debt ain't fully paid and will *never* be paid in their terms . . . I said no . . . I said *hell* no! And I kept saying no until I broke the chain and left" (387). I think this passage is significant because it does more than demonstrate one man's refusal to play the

8. As I have argued elsewhere (Yaszek 2005), this proto-Afrofuturist sensibility pervades both Ellison's fiction and his critical essay writing.

role that has been socially scripted for him. It shows how, in refusing this role, one man can change the future: Tarp's debt – such as it is – will never be paid because he refuses to become the subservient black man he is supposed to be. Instead, he removes himself from the bad future that has been imposed on him and allies himself with the Brotherhood in hope of a better tomorrow.

But if Ellison's protagonist says no to all those whitewashed futures that deny the complexity of his history and identity – including those offered by the Brotherhood – what is left to him? Toward the end of the novel he encounters two possible black futures, but neither is very satisfactory. On the one hand, Ras the Exhorter/Destroyer dreams of a Black Nationalist future in Africa, but these dreams turn out to be little more than recycled scenarios from old Hollywood films. Indeed, one observer directly compares Ras's warrior-king clothes to “the kind you see them African guys [wearing] in the moving pictures” and his horse to “Heigho, the goddam Silver” (563). On the other hand, Rinehart the gangster suggests that black Americans might do best to resist predetermined futures and “open up new sections of reality” by embracing whatever role is most appropriate at the moment: preacher or pimp, lover or fighter, criminal or informer. Unfortunately, when the invisible man tries this out on his political constituency it backfires horribly and Harlem explodes in a night of apocalyptic rioting that tears the community apart and leaves the invisible man trapped in the sewer system beneath New York City.

At first this seems to be a fortunate fall for Ellison's protagonist. Once the invisible man is outside – or underneath – American society he finds that he can begin to exert some control over it. Indeed, he becomes a kind of proto-hacker, stealing electricity from Broadway to light his hiding place and power his Louis Armstrong records. He also becomes a proto-Afrofuturist author, rethinking the relations of his past and present and mapping the networks of power that would propel him into various futures not of his own making. Thus the basement becomes a time and space vessel that carries Ellison's protagonist toward a new identity, a new aesthetic practice, and perhaps, finally, a truly new future.⁹

But the invisible man never quite gets there. In the final pages of Ellison's novel he admits, “it escapes me. What do I really want, I've

9. If nothing else, the basement does become a literal time machine for the invisible man. According to Patrick W. Shaw, the chronology of the novel indicates that he stays in his basement from 1931 to 1948, or *17 years* (119).

asked myself. Certainly not the freedom of a Rinehart or the power of [the Brotherhood], nor simply the freedom not to run. No, but the next step I [can't] make, so I've remained in the hole" (574). As such, the invisible man remains perpetually on the edge of revelation and the edge of action, aware that he holds within himself the possibility of a new future, but one that doesn't seem quite ready to be born just yet.

Making it new: Afrofuturist fictions of the 20th and 21st centuries

Although Ellison's invisible man may never be ready to confront the future, many other Afrofuturist artists have done just that – and in a range of provocative ways. Consider the visions of tomorrow crafted by two Afrofuturist authors from the first half of the 20th century: W.E.B. Du Bois and George S. Schuyler. In many ways, Du Bois and Schuyler could not be more different from one another. Du Bois was a radical sociologist and civil rights activist who firmly believed that people of color from across the world should come together to fight racism. By way of contrast, Schuyler was a conservative journalist for the *Pittsburgh Courier* who fiercely condemned racism but who also rejected the notion of a globally unified black art, culture, or politics. Nonetheless, both men were committed to using speculative narrative forms to imagine how black people might participate in the creation of the future.

For example, W.E.B. Du Bois's short story "The Comet," which first appeared in the 1920 collection *Darkwater: Voices from Within the Veil*, both invokes and rewrites the science fiction disaster story. According to science fiction scholars David Pringle and Peter Nicholls, disaster stories generally imagine how "vast biospheric changes . . . might drastically affect human life" (1993: 338). The stories appeal to modern Western readers because "they represent everything we most fear and, at the same time, perhaps, secretly desire: a depopulated world, escape from the constraints of a highly organized industrial society, [and] the opportunity to prove one's ability as a survivor" (338). This is certainly true of Du Bois's story, which uses the natural disaster of a comet passing through Earth's atmosphere to explore whether or not there might be a future in which humans finally escape the constraints of a highly *racist* industrial society.

"The Comet" follows the story of Jim Davis, a talented young black man who quietly resents that his skin color has doomed him to the menial job of errand boy for a large New York City bank. Indeed, as Jim rather grimly notes to himself upon being ordered to retrieve

some ancient records from an abandoned subterranean vault at the beginning of the story, "of course they wanted him to go down to the lower vaults. It was too dangerous for more valuable men" (5). Somewhat ironically, this "dangerous" errand actually saves Jim's life when the comet's poisonous tail passes through the city and kills everyone aboveground. At first Jim is understandably horrified by the comet's destruction because it seems he is the only person left alive on Earth. And yet once he eats a meal in an upscale whites-only restaurant and liberates a car from its dead white driver, Jim begins to see some distinct advantages to the situation. For the first time in his life, he does not have to worry about his skin color but can instead enjoy all the luxuries available to white people in a high-tech society.

Jim's newly enlarged sense of humanity is further confirmed by his chance meeting with one other survivor: a rich young white woman who happens to be working in her basement darkroom at the time of the comet's passage. Although she initially sees Jim as "a man alien in blood and culture" (12), the young woman quickly casts off her race and class prejudices and discovers that she truly likes Jim. Moreover, once she realizes that she and Jim might be responsible for repopulating the entire Earth, affection quickly becomes something else:

Slowly the mighty prophecy of her destiny overwhelmed her . . . She was no mere woman. She was neither high nor low, white nor black, rich nor poor. She was primal woman; mighty mother of all men to come and Bride of Life. She looked upon the man beside her and forgot all else but his manhood, his strong, vigorous manhood . . . She saw him glorified. He was no longer a thing apart, a creature below, a strange outcast of another clime and blood, but her brother humanity incarnate, Son of God and great All-Father of the race to be. (15)

Thus Du Bois suggests that the comet is not really a disaster for our hero. Rather it is an extremely fortunate event that catapults him into a brave new world where sex matters more than race.

But alas, this future is not meant to be. Just as Jim and the young woman prepare to consummate their love, they are discovered by a rescue party whose leader informs them that the comet tail only affected New York City; that the rest of America is just the same as it ever was and that normal services and relations are already being restored to the city itself. He then promptly demonstrates this, of course, by trying to lynch Jim for touching a white woman. Although the young woman intervenes to save Jim's life, she quickly loses interest in him once she is reunited with her rich white fiancé. And even though Jim is finally reunited with his own wife, it is only to learn that the comet has killed their baby. Thus Du Bois ends his story by

suggesting not only that it will take a natural disaster to eradicate racism in America, but that without such a disaster there may no future whatsoever for black Americans.

By way of contrast, George S. Schuyler combines elements of two other science fiction story types – the military adventure and the utopian journey – to depict a future in which diasporic blacks join forces to conquer the world. American science fiction written between the two world wars often revolved around battles with alien races in which sympathetic humans saved the day with their superior knowledge of science and technology (Stableford 1993b: 1297). This is certainly true of “Black Internationale” and “Black Empire,” two interlocking serialized stories that Schuyler published in the *Pittsburgh Courier* between 1936 and 1938. Schuyler’s stories follow the adventures of Carl Slater, a young journalist for *The Harlem Blade* who is swept up into a global battle between two alien races on Earth: white people and everyone else. This global battle – or, more properly, this global revolution – is led by the wealthy and brilliant Dr. Henry Belsidus. Belsidus begins his revolution by gathering together a “Black Internationale” comprised of Afrodiasporic scientists, soldiers, artists, and businesspeople from around the globe. Although they have little common history or culture, these future world leaders are bound together by their frustration with the inability to succeed in a racist world – and, more altruistically, by their commitment to actively creating a new future for black men and women everywhere.

And this is precisely what they do. After decimating the United States with biological warfare, the Black Internationale liberates Africa from its European colonial oppressors and announces the birth of a new Black Empire. When the Europeans protest, Belsidus’s second-in-command General Patricia Givens masterminds a series of air raids that quickly bring Europe to its collective knees. Givens’s efforts are greatly enhanced by timely aid from Martha Gaskins, a young white stockbroker who becomes Belsidus’s lover and, eventually, the head of his European espionage unit. Thus Schuyler suggests that the battle for racial equality will naturally appeal to right-thinking people everywhere, regardless of race and gender.¹⁰

10. While Schuyler remains clearly and firmly committed to women’s rights throughout the *Black Internationale/Black Empire* serials, he treats the possibility of egalitarian race relations in a far more complex manner. Belsidus is generally portrayed as dismissive of white women; indeed, in an early installment of *Black Internationale* he tells Slater that “I use [white] women to aid in [white people’s] destruction. As long as they succeed in carrying out my mission, I spare them. When they fail, I

Even though these scenes of carnage must have been great fun for Schuyler to write – nearly 70 years later, they are certainly still great fun to read – it is important to note that Schuyler balances the carnage with scenes that celebrate Afrodiasporic intellectual prowess and preview the utopian future in store for subjects of the new Black Empire. Indeed, Carl Slater decides to join the black revolution precisely because Belsidus's people have already done so much. They have invented new crops to eliminate world hunger, new information networks to create global community, and even new religions to instill both individual dignity and racial pride in their worshippers. And herein lies the central irony of Schuyler's story. As Bellarius dramatically explains to Slater, it is precisely the experience of slavery and racial discrimination that has prepared Afrodiasporic people for world domination:

All laws here are the laws of the white man, designed to keep us in subjugation and perpetuate his rule. All the means of education and information, from nursery to college, from newspaper to book, are mobilized to perpetuate white supremacy; to enslave and degrade the darker peoples. No student of the race problem, Slater, can escape that conclusion. . . . But white people haven't got all the brains. We are going to out-think and out-scheme the white people, my boy. I have the organization already, Slater, scattered all over the world; young Negroes like yourself: intellectuals, scientists, engineers. They are mentally the equals of whites. They possess superior energy, superior vitality, they have superior, or perhaps I should say more intense, hatred and resentment, that fuel which operates the juggernaut of conquest. . . . You will see in your time a great Negro nation in Africa, all powerful, dictating to the white world. (Schuyler 1991: 14f)

Like any good science fiction author, then, Schuyler uses his utopian society to estrange readers from their assumptions about the past, present, and future of their own world. In *Black Internationale* and *Black Empire*, recent Western history is not just a confirmation of white supremacy, nor is it just a racist tragedy. Rather, it is a series of fortunate events that facilitate the evolution of Afrodiasporic people into supermen and superwomen who will lead all humanity into a new age.

destroy them" (Schuyler 1991: 11). Slater, however, clearly admires Belsidus's white lover Martha Givens, and she is a key character in both *Black Internationale* and *Black Empire*. Indeed, Schuyler ends both serials with highly ambivalent images of Martha weeping because Belsidus refuses to return her love. Even as Schuyler invites readers to revel in Belsidus's world conquest, then, he seems to caution that such triumph can only come at the cost of one's essential humanity.

Much like Ralph Ellison, then, early Afrofuturist authors such as Du Bois and Schuyler wrote stories that revolved around a specific issue: the ability of Afrodiasporic blacks to make a place for themselves in Western – and even global – futurity. By way of contrast, contemporary Afrofuturist authors such as Octavia Butler and Nalo Hopkinson readily assume that people of color will indeed be key players in the history of the future. But this does not mean that they simply create Technicolor versions of traditional science fiction stories, making a few heroic scientists black or brown and a few evil alien others white or pink. Rather, they actively draw upon Afrodiasporic history and culture to tell complex and sometimes contradictory stories about how and why race relations might continue to matter in the future. In doing so, they also contribute to the ongoing development of science fiction itself.

Consider, for example, Octavia Butler's short story "Bloodchild," which first appeared in *Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine* in 1984. At first glance "Bloodchild" seems to be a simple variation on the classic alien invasion story, revolving around the pseudo-Darwinian notion that species must compete with one another to ensure that only the fittest survives (Stableford 1993a: 16). Butler's story takes place in a far-off future where a group of humans have migrated to an alien world to escape persecution on Earth. When they arrive they promptly attempt to exterminate the bug-like T'lic who live there. Unfortunately for the humans, the T'lic are highly advanced people with problems of their own: they are facing certain extinction because the mammals they rely on to incubate their larvae have all but died out. Not surprisingly, the T'lic quickly conquer the human invaders and drug them into submission so human women will bear as many children as possible and thus the T'lic can use surplus human men as hosts for their own larvae, thereby endowing the men with a traditionally female biological function. Given this situation, an apocalyptic struggle between the T'lic and humanity seems inevitable.

However, Butler refuses to indulge in apocalyptic storytelling, instead drawing inspiration from African American history to explore how different races might survive and co-evolve through compromise and cooperation. "Bloodchild" revolves around a human adolescent boy named Gan whose family lives with T'Gatoi, a powerful female T'lic politician who has already radically improved human-T'lic relations by stopping the sale of human men away from their families, creating preserves where humans can live without T'lic interference, and encouraging progressive-minded T'lic and humans to join together into new interspecies families. What T'Gatoi hasn't done,

however, is adequately prepare Gan for childbirth, which the T'lic think of as a highly private matter. It's also a dangerous one: if the larvae are not surgically removed from their hosts at a precise time, they will kill the host by trying to eat their way out from inside him. Understandably, when Gan sees a birth go wrong, all his fears about T'lic control over human "host animals" come rushing to the surface and the young boy threatens to kill both himself and T'Gatoi.

Gan refrains from doing this, however. Instead, he and T'Gatoi talk out their differences - and then, more importantly, recognize their similarities. As the alien neatly puts it:

the animals we once used began killing our eggs after implantation long before your ancestors arrived . . . Because your people arrived, we are relearning what it means to be a healthy, thriving people. And your ancestors, fleeing from their homeworld, from their own kind who would have killed or enslaved them - they survived because of us. We saw them as people and gave them the Preserve when they still tried to kill us as worms. (137)

Recognizing that their species can no longer survive without one another, Gan puts down his gun, reaffirms his love for T'Gatoi, and promises to bear her children. T'Gatoi, meanwhile, vows to make political amends for her cultural short-sightedness. And thus the story ends with Gan and T'Gatoi in one another's arms, conceiving the children that will affirm the possibility of human-T'lic co-evolution.

Significantly, although this is a happy ending for Gan and T'Gatoi, it is probably a very uncomfortable one for Butler's readers. The T'lic still have more power than humans, human women still give birth to human men who will, in turn, give birth to alien babies, and we simply do not know if T'Gatoi will really be able to convince her peers to do right by their new human partners. What Butler does insist upon, however, is that much like African American slaves of the 18th and 19th centuries, the captive humans on T'Gatoi's world do have a choice: they most likely cannot win their freedom by violence, but at the same time, they do not have to be doomed victims or martyrs. Instead, they can forge new kinds of emotional and physical connections with other like-minded individuals to ensure that everyone lives to see a better day. As I read it, then, Gan's choice to bear T'Gatoi's children is a risky but incredibly brave one because it affirms the complexity of historical reality over simple misrepresentations of so-called biological necessity.

I end this essay at the new millennium with Nalo Hopkinson's short story "Ganger (Ball Lightning)." First published in Thomas's *Dark Matter: A Century of Speculative Fiction from the African Diaspora*

(2000), "Ganger (Ball Lightning)" updates Isaac Asimov's classic robot puzzle stories. Throughout the 1940s Asimov wrote a series of stories about robots whose behavior was guided by three immutable rules designed to protect humans against harm by robots. In each tale a robot does something unexpected, and the reader races against Asimov's characters to see who can solve the puzzle first. Hopkinson's story follows a similar, if saucier, pattern. "Ganger" relates the story of Cleve and Issy, who have recently bought full-body sex suits in a desperate attempt to save their marriage (readers learn at the beginning of the story that the only time Cleve and Issy actually communicate anymore is in bed). One night the couple swaps suits to see what it is like to be the opposite sex, and are so surprised by the intensity of the experience that they rip off the suits and throw them in a corner. In the morning Issy wakes up to find out that the suits have merged and come to life. As a kind of electrified double of Cleve and Issy, the doppelganger – or "ganger," as Hopkinson's characters call it – wants nothing more than to have sex with its owners. But because it is made of almost pure electricity, this will obviously kill them.

And hence the puzzle of the story. Where did the ganger come from? How can Issy and Cleve stop it? Like any good Asimovian character, Hopkinson's sex suit hackers quickly and logically figure out what happened: the suits merged and took on a life of their own because Cleve and Issy failed to follow the manufacturer's warning to discharge and separate the suits after every use. They then figure out how to stop the ganger just as quickly and logically. As Issy explains to Cleve, the suits are their doubles, and so the ganger will probably respond to stimuli in much the same manner as Issy and Cleve. Therefore, since the one thing they never want to do anymore is talk, then talking to each other is what's most likely to kill the ganger. And thus Issy and Cleve finally talk, the ganger is destroyed, and their marriage is saved.

In its broadest dimensions, then, Hopkinson's story does not seem to be about race. And yet, it is profoundly engaged with race at two very different levels. First and most obviously, race is the key to unlocking the puzzle at the heart of this tale. During the final battle with the ganger, readers learn why Cleve and Issy do not talk anymore. Cleve reveals that he is afraid to express his feelings because "look at the size of me, the blackness of me. You know what it is to see people cringe for fear when you shout?" (151). Issy, meanwhile, admits that she channels her anxiety about personal relationships into more abstract anger at racial injustice, thereby allowing herself

to “talk around stuff, not about it” (150). Here then Hopkinson extends the tradition initiated by Du Bois, Schuyler, and Butler, insisting not only that race will matter to entire nations in the future, but that it will matter to individual people in their everyday lives as well.

Second, race is central to “Ganger (Ball Lightning)” – and indeed all of Hopkinson’s fiction – in a much more celebratory way as well. Science fiction has traditionally been thought of as the “literature of engineers”; accordingly, authors generally use the same standard American English that is found in engineering textbooks. Hopkinson, however, departs from this tradition by allowing her narrators and characters to speak in the dialects of her pan-Caribbean childhood. In doing so she fulfills the goals of both science fiction and Afrofuturist writing. She reminds us that science fiction is not just the literature of engineers, but the literature of *all* people who live in a high-tech world.

Conclusion: black to the future

In conclusion, I want to propose two reasons why it is important to recover the history of Afrofuturism as it has unfolded over the past two centuries. The first reason is a scholarly one, and has to do with our understanding of literary and cultural history. The past two decades have been marked by an explosion of interest in literary representations of science and technology. These studies tend to follow a very specific and very raced trajectory: they tell us that white authors including T.S. Eliot, Thomas Pynchon, and William Gibson are the real founders of modern technocultural narrative and that authors of color did not engage in this kind of storytelling until identity politics exploded in the 1960s. Thus it seems that white authors got there first, and that people of color have been mere respondents to the new literary forms of 20th and 21st centuries. But this just isn’t true! By recovering Afrodiasporic future story telling traditions we gain a better understanding of the important intellectual and aesthetic work that these authors have performed on both national and global cultural fronts. In doing so, we also learn more about how Afrofuturism transforms science fiction and other modes of technologically engaged literature today.

My second reason for wanting to direct attention to Afrofuturism is political. From the ongoing war on terror to Hurricane Katrina, it seems that we are trapped in an historical moment when we can think about the future only in terms of disaster – and that disaster is almost always associated with the racial other. Of course, there are many artists, scholars, and activists who want to resist these terrifying new representations of the future. As a literary scholar myself, I believe that one

important way to do this is to identify the narrative strategies that artists have used in the past to express dissent from those visions of tomorrow that are generated by a ruthless, economically self-interested futures industry. Hence my interest in Afrofuturism, which assures us that we can indeed just say no to those bad futures that justify social, political, and economic discrimination. In doing so this mode of aesthetic expression also enables us to say yes to the possibility of new and better futures and thus to take back the global cultural imaginary today.

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