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Afrofuturism 2.0: The Rise Of Astro-Blackness

*AUTHORS: REYNALDO ANDERSON & CHARLES E. JONES.
LANHAM*

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*REVIEWER: AMIR ASIM GILMORE
WASHINGTON STATE UNIVERSITY*

When examining the colorblind genre of science fiction and the possibilities of a post-racial future, there is an erasure of Black people, their history, and their stories. Black people were excluded as full subjects within the genre. The obvious omission of race and Black humanity, led to the creation of Black science fiction (Black SF). Black SF is speculative fiction that utilizes Afrocentric themes and imagery to address the concerns of Black people in the twentieth-century techno-culture (Dery, 1993). Black SF gave Black authors the space and the autonomy to control the space, time, and history of Black people. From the writings and theorizations of prominent Black SF writers across the diaspora, Afrofuturism emerged as a literary and cultural aesthetic in the 1990s. Over the last three decades, Afrofuturism has gained substantial value in academic and popular discourse.

Afrofuturism “has become the umbrella term for considering how science fiction, fantasy, and technology can be used to imagine and reimagine lost pasts and new futures for alienated, black others” (Anderson & Jones, p.11). Afrofuturism was coined by cultural critic Mark Dery, in his essay, *Black to the Future* (1993), which was a roundtable discussion with Black scholars Tricia Rose, Samuel R. Delany and Greg Tate. Dery’s essay sought to reframe discussions about art and social change through the Black cultural lens of science and technology in the 1980s and 1990s (Dery, 1993,

Womack, 2013.). Afrofuturism is “as much a reclamation project of a revisionist past as it is an imaginary future” (Anderson & Jones, 2016, p.77). Afrofuturism embraced the history of racialization and disrupted it by functioning within the troubled history of the African diaspora and created a space for African Americans to reimagine their Blackness, Black identity, and speculate about their future.

Scholars such as Reynaldo Anderson and Charles E. Jones (2016) argue that, “the early expression of Afrofuturism was limited to “art, music, the digital divide, and speculative literature,” and that Afrofuturism has currently matured past that (p. viii). Building upon the old to remake anew, Anderson and Jones are reshaping the boundaries of what Afrofuturism is, calling it “Afrofuturism 2.0.” In their well-structured eleven-chapter anthology entitled *Afrofuturism 2.0: The Rise of Astro-Blackness*, Anderson and Jones compiled essays that build upon the previous definition of Afrofuturism but also identify twenty-first century contemporary expressions of Afrofuturism emerging in the areas of metaphysics, speculative philosophy, religion, visual studies, performance art, and philosophy of science and technology in response to the rise of social media and other technological advances in the last decade (Anderson & Jones, 2016).

Anderson and Jones (2016) contend that Afrofuturism 2.0: “is the diasporic techno-cultural ‘Pan-African Movement’ that embraces and acknowledges the regional differences of Black futurisms such as: Caribbean Futurism, African Futurism, and Black Futurism” (Anderson & Jones, p.x). Moreover, they seek to expand the definition of Afrofuturism to include a concept called “Astro-Blackness.” Anderson and Jones (2016) argue that: “Astro-Blackness is a Black identity framework in which a person’s Black state of consciousness is released from the confining and crippling slave or colonial mentality and they become aware of the multitude of possibilities that the universe holds (Anderson & Jones, p. vii).” Astro-Blackness is comparable to the term “woke” that is used by many activists in the Movement for Black Lives. Signifying freedom from a slave mentality, Astro-Blackness also encourages Black people to tap into the cosmos to envision and build a past, present, and future without

structures of oppression.

The essays in *Afrofuturism 2.0* emerged from the relationships that contributors formed with each other at *Astroblackness* conferences and within the field of *Africana Studies*. The contributors to the anthology aspired to “continue the debate about the transition of Afrofuturism into other dimensions of interest or research and approach their themes from various theoretical or analytical perspectives (Anderson & Jones, p. xv). The anthology is separated into three parts: (I) *Quantum Visions of Futuristic Blackness*, (II) *Planetary Vibes, Digital Ciphers, and Hip Hop Sonic Remix*, and (III) *Forecasting Dark Bodies, Africology, and the Narrative Imagination*. Part I showcases how technologies can augment the bodies, spaces and lived experiences of Black people. Part II demonstrates how technologies can augment and preserve history through the usage of music. Part III establishes the importance of having Afrofuturism in fields that it has not entered before. Part I houses chapters 1-3; Part II houses chapters 4-6, and Part III houses chapters 7-11.

In chapter one, Tiffany Barber explores Kenyan-born artist Wangechi Mutu’s *Non je ne regret rien* (2007) in relation to Octavia Butler’s (1979) science fiction neo-slave narrative *Kindred* to ask the question: “What are the agential possibilities for Black female bodies historically represented as quintessentially other, abject, and alien?” (Anderson & Jones, p. xv). Chapter two, contributor Nettrice Gaskins critiques how the usage of “geometric charts or maps, virtual and real-world geographic locations of avatars, or objects such as mobile smartphones reflect movement and migration, and how black/African artists share and exchange cultural data (Anderson & Jones, p.xvi). In chapter three, Ricardo Guthrie explores the connection of Afrofuturism, the environment, and cyborg manifestations within in cinema. In chapter four, author tobias c. van Veen explores how Afrofuturism and Afrocentrism utilize historical revisionism or “chronopolitics” to address the temporal rupture of the Middle Passage and its annihilation of a normalized past. In chapter five, Grace Gibson demonstrates how Black artist Janelle Monae “mixes space with racial and sexual politics, black feminism, historical narratives, and class conflicts all in a ‘radical visionary Afrofuturistic’ perspective” (Anderson & Jones, p. xvii). Contributor Ken McLeod in chapter six explores the place of time-travel and immortality in Afrofuturistic music by analyzing the impact of the late rapper Tupac Shakur as a hologram. In chapter seven, contributor Andrew Rollins explores the necessity of Afrofuturism intersecting with the his-

torical mission of the Black church, as it can provide as a guide for praxis in America. Contributor Lonny Avi Brooks in chapter eight critiques his experience of conducting ethnographies for futurist think tanks in Silicon Valley, as futuristic visions became normalized sets of expectations that espoused racial segregation and discrimination. In chapter nine, David DeJuliis and Jeff Lohr explored how communicology is a framework to understanding Afrofuturism as a speculative discourse (Anderson & Jones, 2016). In chapter ten, Esther Jones utilizes *Africana Womanism* to understand how black women’s science fiction can alter the medical discourse by analyzing the imbalanced medical paradigm and establish a culture of health parity. Lastly in chapter eleven, Nigerian-American author Nnedi Okorafor speaks to the role of which Afrofuturism plays in her novels. These chapters provide the reader a deeper understanding of the applicability of Afrofuturism in various fields.

Within the anthology, one theme that stood out was the connection of technology to the Black arts and the Black humanities. The chapters that spoke to this were chapter two: *A Afrofuturism on Web 3.0*, chapter four: *The Armageddon Effect*, chapter five: *A Afrofuturism’s Musical Princess Janelle Monae* and chapter six: *Hip-hop Holograms*. These four chapters tied together the premise that Black culture, Black vernacular and Black expression are connected by technology. Technology becomes the medium for Afrofuturists to transcend, to reinvent, and to exist in and move between worlds (Anderson & Jones, 2016). Moreover, technology becomes central to Black identity, expression, and vernacular in the digital age. Whether its Herbie Hancock’s use of electronica, GIFs, Periscoping your Twitter followers, or using hashtags on “Black Twitter,” (#BlacklivesMatter, #SolidarityisforWhiteWomen) technology can be a liberating tool that allows expression of oneself and the community at-large (Anderson & Jones, 2016). Black culture renews itself through improvisation, collage, sampling and remixing, which is widely seen in Black music. Black music is futuristic and is constantly progressive because it changes with the times, it is reflective of Black people, and it always stay ahead of imitation (Reddell, 2013). This is evident within genres such as jazz and even hip-hop. The use of improvisation and call and response in jazz by artists such as John Coltrane, Herbie Hancock, and Sun Ra redefined what music was and could be, and created new possibilities for other Black musicians such as George Clinton of the Parliament-Funkadelic, Jimi Hendrix, Africa Bambaataa, Erykah Badu, and Janelle Monae to express

themselves through instrumentation and electronic music production (Anderson & Jones, 2016). Within the realm of hip-hop, artists will sample other artists, poems, speeches, field recordings, and remix songs to create something entirely new. A great example of this in the book was how Public Enemy sampled Black activist Malcolm X's words on the 1991 song: "Can't Truss It" (Anderson & Jones, p.69). By using scratching samples of Malcolm X, Terminator X (DJ) was able to "construct an ominous sound collage that collapsed the traumas of the past into the acoustic environment of the present (Anderson & Jones, p. 69) Moreover, using technology, Malcolm X's words are forever immortalized within this generational exchange as he can be appreciated by new audiences that never heard his speeches before. This reworking of the past is vital for the progression of Black people. This example demonstrated the importance of the generational exchange. It is for reinvention of Black identity and expression, but also to have the agency to travel to and in-between different worlds. As Black artists push towards the future, they use the past as propellant (Reddell, 2013, p. 96). This the true meaning of the "Sankofa;" looking back as you go forward. These chapters were an excellent addition to the anthology.

To conclude, *Afrofuturism 2.0: The Rise of Astro-Blackness* is a well-researched and engaging book

that deserves its space in critical scholarship and has a scholarly home within the field of Africana Studies and hopefully others, in due time. This anthology continues to solidify the movement of Afrofuturism by building on the original concept and advocate for social justice in the digital age. Reynaldo Anderson and Charles E. Jones are continuing to push the boundaries and re-define Afrofuturism, as it is important in scholarship to examine and reexamine concepts to ensure that they still appropriate in contemporary times. Scholars and Afrofuturists will appreciate this anthology, as it has some focus on Afrofuturism 1.0 concepts such as art, music and literature, but also pushes beyond that, by delving into fields such as architecture, communications, religion, philosophy, and medical. Afrofuturism 2.0 was stimulating to read because it demonstrates the importance of how Afrofuturism needs to be incorporated in various fields. This book can also help a reader understand the infinite possibilities of Afrofuturism and can serve as a "roadmap" of suggestive fields that need to be explored in relation to Afrofuturism. This book is ideal for those with a foundational understanding of the ideas and practices of Afrofuturism, because of many taken for granted terms and concepts. The essays from this book would make great course material for an Africana Studies course on Black arts and culture.

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