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2020-2021 Afrofuturism Syllabus - Week 20 - "A Past Unremembered: The Transformative Legacy of the Black Speculative Imagination" Exhibit

ZORA! Festival Academic Conference:
2020-2021 Afrofuturism Syllabus

2021

"A Past Unremembered: The Transformative Legacy of the Black Speculative Imagination" Exhibition Catalog

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A Past Unremembered:

A BLACK
SPECULATIVE
ODYSSEY



Afrofuturism:

MAPPING
THE SONIC
IMAGINATION



Probably the most significant collector and interpreter of Southern African American culture, Zora Neale Hurston (1891-1960), writer, folklorist, anthropologist, has since the 1970s enjoyed a revival of interest, due in large part to “disciples” such as Alice Walker, the Pulitzer Prize-winning author of *The Color Purple*, and her biographers, Robert Hemenway (*Zora Neale Hurston, A Literary Biography*) and Valerie Boyd (*Wrapped in Rainbows*)

A woman of great intensity and charisma, and single-minded in her pursuit of collecting material on “the Negro farthest down,” has secured her place among those who have painted the 20th century America’s cultural landscape.

She refused simply to record the ways of her people and thereby condemn her “studies” to dusty library shelves where only researchers would consider them. Rather, Zora used her creative genius to bring the unique and wonderful culture of African Americans to mainstream America via captivating novels, short stories and dramatic presentations. The woman from Eatonville, Florida, has captured the attention of a worldwide audience with her interpretation of African American culture as a part of the human saga.

This space, the Zora Neale Hurston National Museum of Fine Arts (The Hurston) is named in honor of Historic Eatonville’s most famous resident.

The Mission of The Hurston: Established in 1990, The Hurston’s mission is to provide a place “in the heart of the community” where the public can view the work of artists of African ancestry, who live in the United States or throughout the Diaspora.

MUSEUM SPONSOR

Incorporated in 1988 as a non-profit/tax exempt historic preservation organization, the Association to Preserve the Eatonville Community, Inc. (P.E.C.) presents a year-round, multidisciplinary arts and humanities program. P.E.C.’s mission is to enhance the considerable cultural resources of Eatonville, Florida, which is “the oldest incorporated African American municipality in the United States” and the hometown of writer, folklorist, and anthropologist Zora Neale Hurston; to educate the public about Eatonville’s historic and cultural significance; and to use the community’s heritage and cultural vibrancy for its economic development.

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This publication is the catalog to the
exhibition *A Past Unremembered:
A Black Speculative Odyssey &
Afrofuturism: Mapping the Sonic
Imagination*, held at the Zora Neale
Hurston National Museum of Fine Arts,
January 9 - December 31, 2021.
Curated by Julian C. Chambliss, Ph.D.
and Phillip Cunningham, Ph.D.,
this joint exhibition celebrates, in part,
the 2020 - 2024 Seventh Cycle of the
annual Zora Neale Hurston Festival of
the Arts and Humanities (ZORA! Festival),
which explores Afrofuturism.

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A Past Unremembered:

A B L A C K
S P E C U L A T I V E
O D Y S S E Y

&

Afrofuturism:

M A P P I N G T H E
S O N I C I M A G I N A T I O N

Curated by Julian C. Chambliss, Ph.D.
and Phillip L. Cunningham, Ph.D.

Zora Neale Hurston National Museum of Fine Arts

Association to Preserve the Eatonville Community, Inc.

Eatonville, Florida

2021

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

In this space, I am pleased to recognize the support, without which, this exhibition and catalog could not have been produced. *A Past Unremembered: A Black Speculative Odyssey & Afrofuturism: Mapping the Sonic Imagination* is emblematic of the finest collaborative endeavor. A brilliant concept, fueled by intellectual and creative energy, provides the public with an understanding of and an appreciation for “. . . movement examining the overlap between race, art, science, and design . . .” (Dr. Reynaldo Anderson, *Afrofuturism 2.0 & The Black Speculative Arts Movement: Notes on a Manifesto*)

At the Spring 2018 meeting of the ZORA!® Festival National Planners, the time during which distinguished scholars and cultural artists gather to discuss and determine the long-range and annual programming for the Zora Neale Hurston® Festival of the Arts and Humanities (ZORA!Festival), Dr. Julian Chambliss advocated for a cycle-long exploration of Afrofuturism. Happily, the consensus was to devote the Seventh Cycle of ZORA! Festivals, 2020 - 2024, to Afrofuturism and to ask Dr. Chambliss to serve as the curator for the entire five years, a first-time recommendation I made to the Board of Directors and which it approved.

Dr. Chambliss has continued to be a driving intellectual and creative force; and joining him, Dr. Cunningham has quickly become a member of “The P.E.C. Family,” committing his time to public humanities programs which help to expand the reach of The Hurston®.

Prof. Trent Tomengo, Dr. Clarissa West-White, and Alice Grant have each made essential contributions to this undertaking. Serving as consultant, Prof. Tomengo has brought to us important “on-the-ground” expertise. Dr. West-White, representing the finest traditions of the librarian-scholar, has developed a gift to anyone who wishes to learn more about Afrofuturism. And my esteemed, decades-long colleague, Alice Grant, has been generous in loaning her considerable expertise as copy editor.

Of course, no project can go forward without funding. To Orange County Government, through the Arts & Cultural Affairs Program, and to the University of Central Florida, College of Arts and Humanities, we are indebted. Moreover, I must acknowledge the strong support of Executive Associate Dean Lyman Brodie, whose keen insight and experience provide a solid foundation for the UCF - P.E.C. partnership.

As I close, let me express our organization’s gratitude for two other professional relationships, that with the graphic artist, Wendy Vandenberg and the in-kind printing support from the Orlando Utilities Commission (OUC). She is always ready to take on an assignment and, without flinching, to meet a deadline. The OUC is an ideal partner, which recognizes the mutual advantage which accrues to the private-public collaboration.

N. Y. Nathiri
January 2021

WHY AFROFUTURISM?

Julian Chambliss, Ph.D.

In his definitional essay “Afrofuturism 2.0 & The Black Speculative Arts Movement: Notes on a Manifesto,” Dr. Reynaldo Anderson wrote of “embryonic movement examining the overlap between race, art, science, and design has been stirring and growing” into a global movement. What today is recognized as Afrofuturism has roots in a broader global history of blackness ignored in the western context and particular roots in African American liberatory experience. Thus, Afrofuturism has sparked discussion across academic disciplines as an epistemological tool to challenge systemic antiblackness inherent to western knowledge creation even as popular expression celebrates contemporary cultural events such as Marvel’s *Black Panther* (2018). As an epistemological tool, Afrofuturism calls our attention to how colonial belief and practice designed to facilitate imperial exploitation in the Age of Discovery continues to shape our world. Contemporary scholars talking about and acting on the ideas of Afrofuturism are merely continuing a theoretical practice geared toward dismantling the ideology of oppression.

The current intellectual activism linked to Afrofuturism is a challenge to our established notion of knowledge production and dissemination. As contemporary scholars engage in this work, a complex process of recovery that recognizes the legacy of black knowledge within black culture exists and can be found by examining everyday practice and discovery which considers how a framework centered on African Diaspora practice offers new ways to understand science, aesthetic, philosophy and gender is taking place. Inherent to Afrofuturism’s critique of the colonial power structure that defines modernity is a recognition of how black thought and action has been demonized and marginalized. In the U.S. context, this knowledge persists within black communal spaces but often lies outside white-controlled institutions. Current scholarly production seeks to remedy this inequity. Thus, scholars such as Dr. Kinitra Brooks, who champions a consideration of rootwork or traditional medicinal practice common within the black community, challenge us to understand that the definition of “knowledge” has been and continues to be shaped by antiblack belief. Her work seeks to bring the conjure woman into the canonical conversation and in doing so validate black folk practice. These efforts weave an inclusive narrative that recognizes the ways seminal figures such as W.E.B. DuBois and Zora Neale Hurston might be understood as part of a “black speculative” tradition dedicated to freedom and rejecting the tenets of “white” modernity. In this way, we can see how those past actors concerned with arts and letters are analogous to contemporary figures such as curator Ingrid LaFleur,

who engages in a political art practice that seeks to celebrate and invigorate Detroit using an Afrofuturism platform concern with art and practice or artists such as John Jennings whose aesthetic vision centers African American cultural experience through critical design practice.

Dynamic and evolving, Afrofuturism as theory and practice can and will continue to grow. It describes both a mode of knowledge production and corresponding practice that seeks to set a new inclusive standard for understanding society. A forum that can support this process is crucial. This is why the Zora Neale Hurston Festival of the Arts and Humanities engagement with the movement matters. As a long-standing public humanities project, it has an intergenerational audience that can benefit from the emerging scholarship and reconcile it with established black cultural practice. The challenge of this moment is understanding and the Zora Festival can play a pivotal role. Beginning in 2020, the festival brought scholars such as Reynaldo Anderson, Afrofuturist theorist and co-founder of the Black Speculative Arts Movement, Isiah Lavender III, author of *Afrofuturism Rising: The Literary Prehistory of a Movement* (2019) and Kinitra Brooks, editor of *Searching for Sycorax: Black Women's Hauntings of Contemporary Horror* (2017) explore the literary roots of black speculative practice.

In 2021, the festival continues the pivotal work of defining the scope and meaning of Afrofuturism by exploring sound. In truth, the turn toward sound is a natural evolution. For centuries oral traditions and musical composition served as a form of technology. While this may seem a startling phrase, one 2021 keynote scholar Erik Steinskog, author of *Afrofuturism and Black Sound Studies* (2018) has demonstrated how sound serves as a kind of cultural technology sketching across time and linking cultural spaces. In a similar manner, another keynote scholar Paul Ortiz, Director of the University of Florida Samuel Proctor Oral History Center has written about the ways African American oral histories in the Gulf South represent a vital resource to understand the social, political, and economic transformation of the United States. Ortiz sees Zora Neale Hurston's work as foundational to our understanding of American culture and he joins keynote scholar Toniesha Taylor, a leading digital humanities scholar who champions the study of black orality as a central tool in critical race studies. Lastly, keynote scholar Regina Bradley, whose forthcoming book *Chronicling Stankonia: the Rise of the Hip Hop South* uses the lens of southern Hip Hop duo OutKast to understand how sonic tradition central to civil right activism persists in contemporary urban culture. Taken together, these scholars will allow the public to garner a greater understanding of how and why Afrofuturism is a vital framework to address our contemporary moment.

BLAKE; OR HUTS OF AMERICA

OUR VISION OF FREEDOM

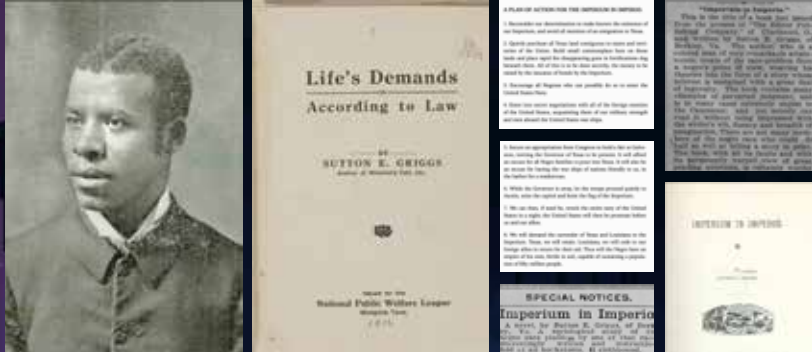
MARTIN R. DELANY, 1812-1885

Martin R. Delany was an author, physician, and activist thought to have been the first African American to articulate a black nationalist ideology. Delany was born free in 1812 in Charles Town, Virginia (later West Virginia) and raised in Pennsylvania. Delany traveled throughout the South witnessing the atrocities linked to slavery and in 1847, he worked alongside Frederick Douglass to publish the *North Star*, an early antislavery newspaper. During the Civil War, he volunteered and became the first black field-grade officer (major, lieutenant colonel, or colonel) in the history of the United States Army. A published writer on science and social topics, his novel *Blake; or the Huts of America* was the story of an escaped slave named Henry Blake, who traveled throughout the southern United States and the Caribbean to unify slaves for hemisphere-wide revolt. Written amid the political strife leading to the Civil War, *Blake* is a counterpoint to the humble Christian slave enduring oppression found in novels of the period. Instead, Delany created a resilient black character who defies slavery and seize his freedom. Delany's hero is intelligent, resourceful, and driven, and through him, we see slavery's evil and the depths of black resiliency. In organizing his rebellion, Blake revisits locations where blacks strove for freedom in previous generations. From cooperation with Native Americans to Nat Turner and Denmark Versey's resistance, Delany catalogs the evidence of blacks striving for freedom.

The story was published serially in 1859 in the *Anglo-African Magazine* and the *Weekly Anglo-African* in 1861 and 1862. The Beacon Press (Boston MA) published the first book version in 1970. CO-CURATED BY DR. JULIAN CHAMBLISS, PROFESSOR OF ENGLISH AND HISTORY, MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY, YAL BERRYMAN CURATOR OF HISTORY, MSU MUSEUM • PHILLIP L. CUNNINGHAM, ASSISTANT PROFESSOR OF MEDIA STUDIES, QUINNIPIAC UNIVERSITY

IMPERIUM IN IMPERIO: A STUDY OF THE NEGRO RACE PROBLEM A BLACK STATE?

SUTTON E. GRIGGS (1872-1933)



Sutton E. Griggs was an author, pastor, and black nationalist. He was born in Chatfield, Texas (1872), and attended Bishop College in Marshall, Texas and Richmond Theological Seminary in Richmond, Virginia. His most famous work, *Imperium in Imperio*, translates to 'state within a state' and tells the story of an African-American conspiracy to create a black nation inside the United States. Griggs's speculative work contrasted philosophies of black social action using the central characters in *Imperio* to attack notions of colorism and class privilege. Writing during the height of antiblack violence and political disenfranchisement, the novel centers on Belton Piedmont and Bernard Belgrave, friends turned bitter enemies. The clash between Piedmont and Belgrave allows Griggs to promote black self-love and warn of the dangers of interracial relationships as central tenets of racial progress. Overall, Griggs's fictional writing emphasized black unity, self-determination, and social justice, and acted as a companion to his real-world actions. He attended the Niagara Movement, a civil rights meeting organized by W.E.B. DuBois and William Monroe Trotter in 1905, and protested police brutality, segregation, and education inequality. Griggs founded a publishing house to spread his ideas and organized black self-help organizations such as the National Public Welfare League (1914) and the National Religious and Civic Institute for Baptist of Houston (1931).

Published by The Editor Publishing Co., Cincinnati, Ohio, 1899.
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OF ONE BLOOD: OR, THE HIDDEN SELF (1902-1903) A LEGACY RECLAIMED

PAULINE E. HOPKINS (1859-1930)



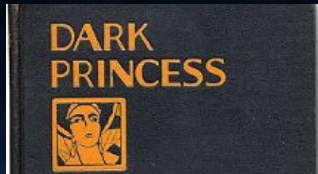
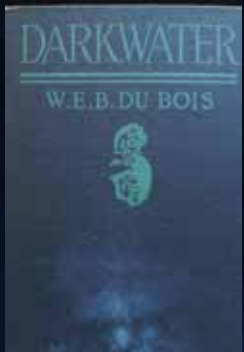
Pauline Elizabeth Hopkins was an African American author, playwright, songstress, journalist, and editor, who fought for equal rights and was a member of the National Association of Colored Woman's Clubs. Hopkins was born in 1859 in Portland, Maine. She attended public school and performed her first creative work, in 1880, a musical entitled *Slaves' Escape; or The Underground Railroad* as part of her family's singing group in 1880. She spent several years touring before writing her first novel, *Contending Forces: A Romance Illustrative of Negro Life North and South* in 1900. Questions growing from post-Reconstruction racism and the need to engage middle-class African Americans inspired her work. Hopkins addressed the "double consciousness" articulated by W.E.B. DuBois by emphasizing the importance of having and being proud of a common black identity. *Of One Blood; Or the Hidden Self* explores this issue by portraying a vibrant Ethiopian civilization teeming with intelligence and complexity. Hopkins's story offered escape and affirmation by making the lead character a descendant of and future king to a black utopia. Serving as the women's and literary editor for *The Colored American Magazine*, Hopkin published *Of One Blood* in serialized form between 1902 and 1903. Ultimately, her work sheds light on racial trauma while criticizing the othering and prejudice linked to blackness in the United States.

Published Serially in *The Colored American Magazine*, 1903 Oxford University Press, 1988.
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THE COMET (1920) • DARK PRINCESS: A ROMANCE (1928)

A VISIONARY

W.E.B. DU BOIS (1868-1963)



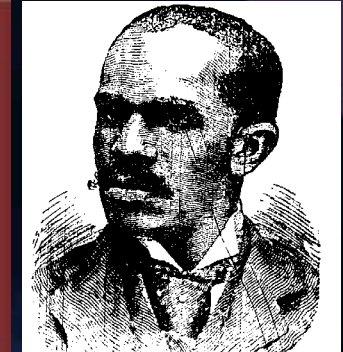
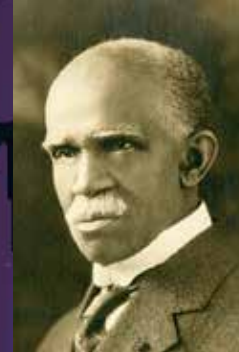
William Edward Burghardt Du Bois may be the preeminent African American scholar and intellectual of the 20th Century. A prolific writer known primarily for his influential collection of essays *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), Du Bois also wrote fiction that serves as a precursor to today's Afrofuturism. His short story "The Comet" is an early black post-apocalyptic narrative in which Jim Davis, a black courier, and Julia, a wealthy white woman, are the apparent sole survivors of a comet that has struck New York City. Despite their circumstances, Julia initially maintains her racism; however, they eventually begin resolving their differences. Unfortunately, the foundations of a postracial world are disrupted when Julia's father and fiance find them, and Julia leaves Davis behind. Du Bois's novel *Dark Princess* traces the life of Matthew Townes, a black college student whose dreams of becoming an obstetrician are dashed by racial prejudice. While in exile overseas, Townes falls in love with Princess Kautilya, a member of a secret coalition evaluating whether African Americans are worthy of joining them. After being separated from Kautilya and imprisoned for a plot to bomb a train carrying Ku Klux Klan officials, Townes spends several years as a politician before reuniting with the princess and their newborn son. Both "The Comet" and *Dark Princess* examine the possibilities that emerge with the disruption of racial hierarchies.

Published in *Darkwater: Voices from Within the Veil* by Harcourt, Brace, and Company, New York City, New York, 1920. Published by Harcourt, Brace, and Company, New York City, New York, 1928.

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THE BLACK SLEUTH (1907-1909) OUR GLOBAL VISION

JOHN EDWARD BRUCE (1856-1924)

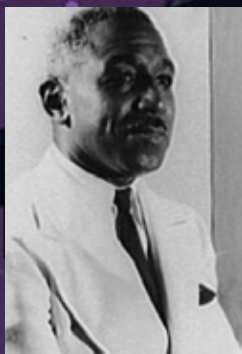


Born enslaved in Maryland in 1856, John Edward Bruce would become one of the early 20th Century's most prolific black journalists and fervent black nationalists. Bruce has remained relatively obscure despite writing *The Black Sleuth* (1907-1909), which alongside Pauline Hopkins' *Hagar's Daughter* (1901), is one of the formative black detective fiction works in American history. Serialized in the black-owned *McGirt's Magazine* from 1907 to 1909, *The Black Sleuth* follows West African detective Sadipe Okukenu as he investigates the theft of a priceless diamond in a winding tale that takes him from Africa to the American South. However, *The Black Sleuth* is no mere detective story, for as one of the first "African abroad" texts, it fervently tackles Western imperialism, notions of black inferiority, and accommodationist politics. Such themes are of no surprise given that Bruce was an avid (albeit complicated) black nationalist who once clashed with his former patron Booker T. Washington and supported--after some initial skepticism--and worked alongside Marcus Garvey as he grew more pessimistic about black life in America. Through its highly intelligent African protagonist and decentering of whiteness, *The Black Sleuth* epitomizes Bruce's ideology and presents readers a progressive image of Africa and its people.

Serialized in *McGirt's Magazine* (1907-1909) • Novelization by Northeastern University Press, 2002
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BLACK EMPIRE (1936-1938) AN OPPOSING VIEW

GEORGE SCHUYLER (1895-1977)

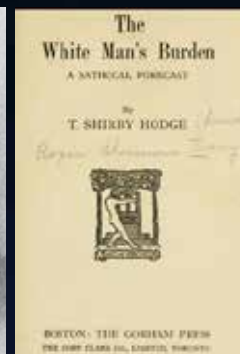
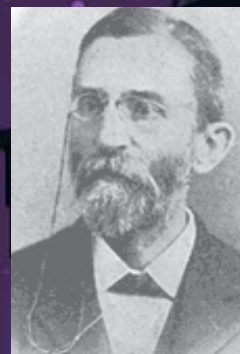


The iconoclastic George Schuyler was perhaps the foremost black conservative columnist of the early- and mid-20th Century. Schuyler established his journalistic career as a socialist commentator and satirist in *The Pittsburgh Courier*, one of the most prominent black newspapers of that era, and in A. Philip Randolph's socialist magazine *The Messenger*. However, Schuyler became more conservative throughout the years, offering scathing critiques of the Harlem Renaissance and black nationalism. His science fiction classic *Black Empire*--serialized in two parts, *Black Internationale* and *Black Empire*--satirizes the latter. In *Black Empire*, black journalist Carl Slater is coerced by the nefarious, murderous Dr. Henry Belsidius, leader of the *Black Internationale* secret society seeking to unite the diaspora and overthrow white hegemony. Belsidius utilizes an array of advanced technology and weaponry to usher in a black fascist dictatorship. The story also presents--for its time--a strong black female character in Patricia Givens, a pilot who proves to a capable foe to Belsidius. Dubbed the "Black H.L. Mencken," Schuyler continued as a staunch black conservative contrarian, much to the chagrin of the *Courier's* publishers, who released Schuyler after his condemnations of prominent civil rights activists such as Martin Luther King, Jr lead to readership declines and boycott threats. His last major publication was the autobiographical *Black and Conservative* (1966).

Serialized in *The Pittsburgh Courier* (1936-1938) • Novelization by Northeastern University Press, 1993
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THE WHITE MAN'S BURDEN: A SATIRICAL FORECAST (1915) BLACK UTOPIA

ROGER SHERMAN TRACY (1841-1926)



Roger Sherman Tracy, born in Windsor, Vermont, in 1841, was a Yale educated physician, hygienist, and health textbook author before retiring as the Registrar of Records in the New York Health Department in 1901. Afterwards, he dedicated his life to a literary career that resulted in *The White Man's Burden: A Satirical Forecast* (1915), which he wrote under the pseudonym T. Shirby Hodge. *The White Man's Burden* focuses on unnamed white narrator from the 20th Century who somehow awakens in Africa in 5027 to find that, through anarchy and scientific advancement, black people have created a veritable utopia while, conversely, white people have relapsed into barbarism and are restricted to the United States. After learning of the Americans intend to reconquer Africa, the denizens of this African utopia entreat the narrator to act as an emissary to stave off an impending war. However, the narrator is unsuccessful, and the white invaders are soundly defeated by Africa's advanced technology and the narrator returns his own time. The book effectively critiqued the social ills of the time, particularly the notion of white supremacy and racial prejudice.

Published by The Gorham Press, Boston, Massachusetts, 1915.
CO-CURATED BY DR. JULIAN CHAMBLISS, PROFESSOR OF ENGLISH AND HISTORY, MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY, VAL BERRYMAN CURATOR OF HISTORY, MSU MUSEUM • PHILLIP L. CUNNINGHAM, ASSISTANT PROFESSOR OF MEDIA STUDIES, QUINNIPIAC UNIVERSITY

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Afrofuturism: MAPPING THE SONIC IMAGINATION

SOUND AND AFROFUTURISM

Sonic Fictions in the Past and the Future

Eric Steinskog, Ph.D.

What are the sounds of Afrofuturism? Or, perhaps better, of the Afro-Future? To reflect upon these questions, a basic understanding of Afrofuturism will be important. But perhaps even more important is to reflect upon the role of music in African American life. Such a reflection would have to include thinking about how music is a social force, as well as how music is not only a reflection of life, but integrated into life in all its complexities. The social role of music depends upon its use. Dancing to music establishes a community, as does music in church, and while these communities can be made up of the same people, the different social settings at one and the same time point to different spheres of life but also shows how these spheres are connected.

Afrofuturism is speculative fiction, but it is also a way to center questions on African American history, in the past, the present, and the future.¹ It is about understanding the past, working through suppressed histories, as well as the present, to be able to imagine a future. Imagining and speculating may thus be seen as two sides of the same process. But it is also important to understand that from a speculative point of view, both the past and the future are, in important ways, present in the present. Imagining life on other planets may be key to deciding how to live today. In a similar vein, working with the past, reading past literature, listening to past music, reliving traditions again and again, is also be a way to deepen the understanding of the past. From this deeper understanding, which is also about imagining the past, we can both understand better arrival in the present, as well as better imagining the future. Thus, in a somewhat paradoxical sense, both the future and the past can be said to arrive in the present due to different modes of imagination and speculation.

¹Ytasha L. Womack, *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture*. Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 2013.

Thinking about sounds, however, speculation becomes somewhat different. With the visual dimension found both in the term imagination ('image') and speculation ('speculat-' from Latin "specere" meaning "to look"), it is important to switch to the sonic domain, and thus try to think sounds as ways of perceiving and understanding the world, including in the past and the future.

In his book *More Brilliant Than The Sound: Adventures in Sonic Fiction*, Kodwo Eshun introduces the brilliant concept of "sonic fiction" to write a history of primarily experimental Black music in the 20th century.² Sonic fictions are not only the sounds of the music, although the sonic is the entry-point into a relation with the music. Rather, sonic fictions take the whole context of the music, the aesthetic package of the LP or CD, with liner notes, picture material, and so on, as well as the live performances and philosophical or spiritual or political statements from the musicians into the discourse. The titles of both LPs and compositions are seen as integrated in the sonic fiction, and thus there is more to this music than meets the ears. Still, by making the sonic primary, everything else evolves around the sounds.

Arguably the most important composer, musician, and musical philosopher of Afrofuturism is Sun Ra, born (or arriving) in Birmingham, Alabama in 1914, and leaving Planet Earth in 1993. His claim to extraterrestrial origin opens up for discussing an estrangement from US history that sets African American existence in relief, and also points to how Mark Dery, in his essay "Black to the Future" writes about African Americans as, "in a very real sense," "descendants of alien abductees."³ In Sun Ra's work, everything – life and work, piano playing and cosmic thinking, technological experiments and theatrical performances – belong together, on a scale that can still be felt in most of the music being referred to as Afrofuturist. His long musical career, and the continuous work with his Arkestra, is also a good place to search for answers to the question about sound and Afrofuturism. Sun Ra at one and the same time gives sound to a long period of the 20th century, to a tradition of Black music often, and reductively, called jazz, and to a cosmic and worldly understanding of musical traditions going back to Ancient Egypt and into a future Outer Space.

²Kodwo Eshun, *More Brilliant Than The Sun: Adventures in Sonic Fiction*. London: Quartet Books, 1998.

³Mark 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, p. 180.

The sounds of Sun Ra are obviously not one thing only. There are elements of the big-band tradition of Fletcher Henderson, but also popular songs transformed into the big band format. There are compositions that are more like soundscapes, without much difference between noise and tones, and where different atmospheres become real and sonic. And there are percussion-driven compositions, where several musicians play inter-locked rhythms.

Some of these compositions engage with an African past, much more than either the present or the future. One example is “Ancient Aiethopia” from the 1959 album *Jazz in Silhouette*, which does not reproduce the sonic world of an ancient Ethiopia, but as a sonic imaginary it gives the listeners a version of how the ancient world could sound, how we can imagine the sounds of the distant past. The composition plays into our ideas about the ancient world, with the use of drums and percussion as well as intertwined flute melodies, presenting a quasi-ritualistic music. Playing with our imagination, Sun Ra thus establishes what I elsewhere have referred to as a “sonic time travel.”⁴ We hear, or are transported, back to ancient time, and listening to this music we partake in the time traveling process even as members of the audience.

On the other side of this equation, so to speak, there is “the music of the future.” Eshun writes, in *More Brilliant Than The Sun*, that: “Traditionally, the music of the future is always beatles.”⁵ But this is not necessarily how “the Afro-Future” is musically understood. However, thinking “beatlessness” in futurist soundscapes may also lead us to think about the synthesizer and other electronic sounds. In the case of Sun Ra this includes a number of electronic keyboards heard throughout his work, such as the organ he plays on the 1972 album *Space is the Place*, which on the cover is referred to as “Farfisa (Space) Organ.”⁶ Here, then, the instrument is referred to related to outer space, underlying Sun Ra’s musical thinking and thinking about music.

⁴Erik Steinskog, *Afrofuturism and Black Sound Studies: Culture, Technology, and Things to Come*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018, p. 67.

⁵Mark 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, p. 180.

⁶Cf. Steinskog, *Afrofuturism and Black Sound Studies*, p. 190.

As these few examples show, Sun Ra’s music can be seen as a sonic fiction illustrating both the ancient past and the distant future, with Egypt and Outer Space as signposts for the imagination and speculation. And while Sun Ra may be the paradigmatic example for such a sonic Afrofuturism, he is obviously not alone. Still, other musicians seem, to a large extent to expand upon similar musical strategies. From Parliament’s *Motherhip Connection* (from 1975), with a more funk-based music, and where outer space meets the dance floor as well as radio waves, to Alice Coltrane’s *Ptah*, the *El Daoud* (from 1970), where Egyptian mythology is crucial, but where she also relates to Hindu mythology and mysticism, and thus a more global spirituality. On Earth, Wind & Fire’s albums from the late 1970s – *Spirit* (1976), *All ‘n All* (1977), and *I Am* (1979) – one could argue that spirituality meets the dance floor, and this also testifies to how much music within the Afrofuturist tradition is a remix of already existing elements into continuously new figurations and constellations. As such the sounds of Afrofuturism are in a constant dialogue with sounds from the past, with how the past has imagined the future, and how playing and listening to old and new music like present new versions of the future. In this Amiri Baraka’s notion of “the changing same” shows itself to not only be a way of understanding the historical transformations of Black Music, but also in speculating about the sounds of the Afro-Future.⁷

⁷LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka, “The Changing Same (R&B and New Black Music)” (1966), in *Black Music*. New York: Akashic Books, 2010 (1968).

MAPPING THE SONIC IMAGINATION

Julian C. Chambliss, Ph.D.

From the beginning of the modern engagement with Afrofuturism, sound has been a crucial element. In his groundbreaking study of Afrofuturism, Kodwo Eshun wrote of “psychoacoustic fictional spaces” that “crumple chronology” and, in doing so, bounds together the Black Atlantic. Sound serves as a not so secret technology that catalogs the human experience and formulates new possibilities. For Afrofuturism, sound is a technology, and black hands and minds have used that technology to reshape the universe.

Tracing Afrofuturism through sound offers essential ways to recover the legacy of black speculative practice. An analysis of Afrofuturism rooted in sound provides the potential to see layers of connection through time, space, and instruments that highlight the diasporic nature of black speculative practice. This reality supports what Afrofuturist sound theorist Erik Steinskog calls “multimedial transmission” at the heart of sound’s role in Afrofuturism. When cultural critic Mark Dery first coined the term Afrofuturism, he urged us to consider that black people have “other stories to tell about culture, technology, and things to come.” Sound is a technology that provides information and serves as a communal archive that transmits stories about black existence. Sound allows black people to disseminate knowledge of the past, critique the present, and imagine the future without constraint. From the black church and the spiritual life it fostered to contemporary Hip Hop, sound offers black people a space to examine traumas, fears, and hopes that shape their world. With this playlist, we provide examples of this Afrofuturist practice.

Our list is not exhaustive. We seek to offer a glimpse of those artists linked to Afrofuturism as the academic discussion about sound and Afrofuturism has developed. Early theorists identified artists such as Sun Ra, Parliament, LaBelle, Earth Wind and Fire, and Lee “Scratch” Perry as exhibiting Afrofuturist traits. These artists offered a transgressive look and sound that rejected the constraints placed on blackness and sought a transformative path toward the future. Figures such as John Coltrane and Robert Johnson represent how black music traditions, Jazz and Blues, are recognized as Afrofuturist. They represented invented sound technology created by black people and speaking directly to the black experience. These artists stand in sonic solidarity with Hip Hop icons such as Afrika Bambaataa and Rammellzee, who also help forge a new artform building on black cultural practices. Contemporary figures such as Janelle Monáe and Flying Lotus are the latest inheritors of the Afrofuturist label. These performers highlight the continual evolution of sonic imagination and its call for freedom, love, and a better tomorrow.

DISCOGRAPHY



Album: *The Other Side of the Sun*
Artist: Sun Ra and his Arkestra
Label: Sweet Earth Records
Country: United States
Released: 1979



Album: *Mothership Connection*
Artist: Parliament
Label: Casablanca
Country: United States
Released: 1975
Genre: Funk/Soul
Style: P. Funk/Funk
Songs from album: *Mothership Connection* (Star Child)
Supergroovalisticprosifunkstication (The Bumps Bump)
Unfunky UFO



Album: *The Archandroid*
Artist: Janelle Monáe
Label: Bad Boy Entertainment, Wondaland
Country: United States
Released: 2010
Genre: Electronic, Hip Hop, Funk/Soul, Pop
Style: New Wave, Soul, funk
Songs from album: *Dance or Die*, *Featuring Saul Williams*, *Locked Inside*

DISCOGRAPHY



Album: You're Dead!
Artist: Flying Lotus
Label: Warp Records
Country: UK, Europe & US
Released: 2014
Genre: Electronic, Jazz
Style: Future Jazz
Song from album: Coronus, the Terminator

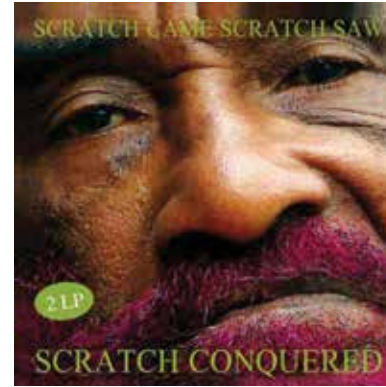


Album: Metropolis: The Chase Suite
(Special Edition)
Artist: Janelle Monáe
Label: Bad Boy Entertainment, Wondaland
Country: US
Released: 2013
Genre: Funk/Soul



Album: Mama's Gun
Artist: Erykah Badu
Label: Motown
Country: United States
Released: 2000
Genre: Hip Hop, Funk/Soul
Style: RnB/Swing, Neo Soul, Conscious
Song from track: Penitentiary Philosophy

DISCOGRAPHY



Album: Scratch Came, Scratch Saw, Scratch Conquered
Artist: Lee "Scratch" Perry
Label: Politur
Country: Europe
Released: 2008
Genre: Reggae
Style: Reggae
Song from album: Having a Party



Album: Nightbirds
Artist: LaBelle
Label: Epic
Country: United States
Released: 1974
Genre: Funk/Soul
Style: Funk/Disco
Song from album: Lady Marmalade



Album: My Brother the Wind (part 2)
Artist: Sun Ra
Label: El Saturn Records
Country: United States
Released: 1971
Genre: Jazz
Style: Free Jazz, Free Improvisation
Song from album: Walking on the Moon

DISCOGRAPHY



Album: Cosmic Flush
Artist: Rammellzee
Label: Gamma Proforma
Country: UK
Released: 2017
Genre: Electronic, Hip Hop, Rock
Style: Experimental, Speedcore
Song from track: Paint to Pave the Road



Album: Planet Rock
Artist: Afrika Bambaataa,
The Soulsonic Force; music by Planet Patrol
Label: Tommy Boy
Country: United States
Released: 1982
Genre: Hip Hop
Style: Electro
Song from album: Planet Rock

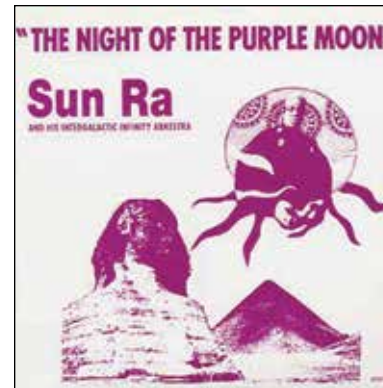


Album: Head to the Sky
Artist: Earth, Wind & Fire
Label: Columbia
Country: United States
Released: 1973
Genre: Jazz, Funk/ Soul
Style: Soul-Jazz, Soul, Funk, Disco
Song from album: Keep Your Head to the Sky

DISCOGRAPHY



Album: The Need of Love
Artist: Earth, Wind & Fire
Label: Warner Brothers Records
Country: United States
Released: 1971
Genre: Funk/ Soul
Style: Soul, Funk
Song from album: Energy



Album: The Night of the Purple Moon
Artist: Sun Ra
Label: Troth Intergalactic
Country: United States
Released: 1970
Genre: Jazz
Style: Avant-garde Jazz, Free Jazz
Song from album: Sun-Earth Rock



Album: My Brother the Wind (part 2)
Artist: Sun Ra
Label: El Saturn Records
Country: United States
Released: 1971
Genre: Jazz
Style: Free Jazz, Free Improvisation
Song from album: Walking on the Moon

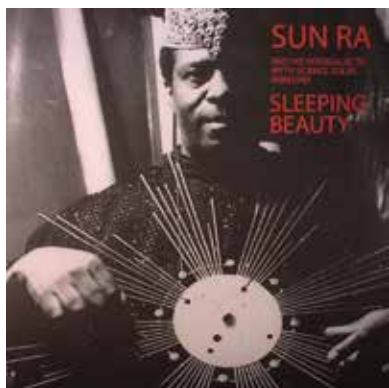
DISCOGRAPHY



Album: Blue Train (Expanded Edition)
Artist: John Coltrane
Label: Blue Note
Country: US
Released: 1957
Genre: Jazz
Style: Hard Bop
Song from track: Blue Train
Remastered 2003



Album: King of the Delta Blues Singers
Artist: Robert Johnson
Label: Columbia
Country: US
Released: 1961
Genre: Blues, Folk, World, Country
Style: Delta Blues
Songs from album: Cross Road Blues
(2:29),
Me and the Devil Blues



Album: Sleeping Beauty
Artist: Sun Ra and His Arkestra
Label: El Saturn Records
Country: US
Released: 1979
Genre: Jazz, Funk/Soul
Style: Free Jazz, Avant-garde Jazz, Big Band,
Free Funk, Space-Age
Song from album: Door of the Cosmos

DISCOGRAPHY



Album: Duke Ellington & John Coltrane
Artist: Duke Ellington & John Coltrane
Label: Impulse!
Country: United States
Released: 1963
Genre: Jazz
Style: Cool Jazz
Song from album: In A Sentimental Mood

Spotify Playlist Weblink

<https://open.spotify.com/playlist/3UYOkEan6O2aYW1JnvrYTB?si=MzDmtgjUQ9uSwuexNHrrrQ>

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The Banjo Lesson

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WCHandy With A&M College Band

<http://aamudigitalcollections.lyrasistechnology.org/islandora/object/aamus.926>

Jazz Albums

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Middle Row, Left to Right

Jazz Record Turntable

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Hurston Playing a Hountar, or Mama Drum

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Hymnal

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Bottom Row, Left to Right

Afrofuturism Celebration

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Make Me Black

©Black Kirby (John Jennings and Stacey Robinson)
Courtesy of the MSU Museum Black Fantastic Collection.
Special Thanks to John Jennings, Stacey Robinson, and Julian Chambliss
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Recording Studio

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Back Cover:

Top

Sun Ra Arkestra, Cafe Oto, London.

Pictures from the 13th and 14th of April 2010, plus a few from the
Volcano induced 19th April performance. Photo by Andy Newcombe
<https://www.flickr.com/photos/92523880@N00/4540507541>

Bottom

Hurston Playing a Hountar, or Mama Drum

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