

THE LANGUAGES OF AFROFUTURISM

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Abstract – Afrofuturism is a transdisciplinary cultural movement based upon the unusual connection between the marginality of allegedly “primitive” people of the African diaspora and “modern” technology and science fiction. At a first glance, Afrofuturism may sound like an oxymoron. “Afro” and “Futurism” are likely to be considered as terms in opposition, the former which used to evoke images of primitivism and backwardness, the latter – ever since F. T. Marinetti’s definition in 1909 – celebrating instead speed and modernity. It is precisely to challenge this assumption that Afrofuturism works on a metaphorical level to reject a number of clichés that have commonly referred to people of African descent. Using a wide range of different genres and media, the creative contribution of Afrofuturist writers, musicians, artists, filmmakers and critics challenges the stereotypical historical view routinely applied to the Black Atlantic experience and proposes counter-histories that reconsider the role of black people in the Western society in the past and imagine alternative roles in the future. The paper aims to consider the different languages of Afrofuturism: music (Sun Ra), visual arts (Basquiat), film (John Coney’s *Space is the Place*) and especially literature – proto-Afrofuturist fiction such as W. E. B. Du Bois’s short story “The Comet” (1920) and more recent examples such as Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* (1952) and Octavia E. Butler’s *Kindred* (1979).

Keywords: Afrofuturism; Black science fiction; African diaspora; racism; slavery.

Astro-Black Mythology
Astro-Timeless Immortality
Astro-Thought in Mystic Sound
Astro-Black of Outer Space
(Sun Ra, “Astro Black”, in Wolf J. L.
and Geerken H. eds. 2005, p. 74).

1. Towards a definition of Afrofuturism

The term “Afrofuturism” was coined in 1993 by cultural critic Mark Dery to refer to “speculative fiction that treats African-American themes and addresses African-American concerns in the context of twentieth-century technoculture”. Wondering whether the black community could imagine possible futures, Dery claimed that “African-American voices have *other* stories to tell about culture, technology, and things to come”¹. In other words, the creative contribution of Afrofuturist writers, musicians, artists, filmmakers and critics challenges the stereotypical historical view that was routinely applied to the Black Atlantic

¹ Dery (1993, p. 736; p. 738). My italics. Dery defined Afrofuturism in an introductory essay to some interviews with critics Tricia Rose and Greg Tate and science fiction writer Samuel R. Delany. According to Eshun (1998, p. 175), it was already in 1992 that the seeds of Afrofuturism had been sown in Mark Sinker’s groundbreaking article “Loving the Alien”, published in *The Wire* magazine. In 1998 Alondra Nelson and Paul D. Miller (DJ Spooky) started the Afrofuturist listserve and in 2000 they launched the website www.afrofuturism.net. See Yaszek (2006).

experience and proposes counter-histories that reconsider the role of black people in Western society in the past and imagine alternative roles in the future.²

Following Dery's definition, several critics have approached the term Afrofuturism in an attempt to clarify its multiple connotations. Afrofuturism's main issues, Alondra Nelson (2002, p. 9) maintains, are "sci-fi imagery, futurist themes, and technological innovation in the African diaspora" dealt with in "original narratives of identity, technology, and the future". Kodwo Eshun (2003, p. 291) argues that "Afrofuturism's first priority is to recognize that Africa increasingly exists as the object of futurist projection". Eshun challenges the idea of Africa as a metaphor for dystopia and catastrophe, suggesting instead an optimistic – or at least an unbiased – vision of the future of Africa. To this purpose, Afrofuturism is "a program for recovering the histories of counter-futures created in a century hostile to Afro-diasporic projection" (p. 301). Yaszek (2006) defines Afrofuturism as "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."

Afrofuturism is therefore a transnational and transdisciplinary cultural movement based upon the unusual connection between the marginality of allegedly "primitive" people of the African diaspora and "modern" technology and science fiction – itself a peripheral literary genre, the "golden ghetto", as William Gibson dubbed it. Afrofuturism and its political agenda are aimed at an epistemology rewriting the history of the past and imagining a positive future for people of African descent. Using a wide range of different genres and media, it involves speculation about the condition of subalternity and the alienation of the past as opposed to aspirations for modernity.³

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First of all, Afrofuturism disrupts the idea of the so-called "digital divide", that is the "tech inequities that exist between blacks and whites" (Nelson 2002, p. 1). Black people have increasingly become aware of the potential of technology, thus reducing the economic inequality caused by a limited access to and knowledge of information and

² Yaszek (2005, p. 299). In Gilroy's cultural studies approach, the concept of the Black Atlantic represents a space of transnational cultural construction based on the history of the people of the African diaspora. As Gilroy defined it (1993b, p. ix): "the intercultural and transnational formation that I call the Black Atlantic".

³ See Dery (1993, p. 736), Nelson (2010) and Yaszek (2006). Afrofuturism is "an expanded field [...] a multimedia project distributed across the nodes, hubs, rings and stars of the Black Atlantic" (Eshun 2003, p. 301); "Afrodiasporic futurism [...] a 'webbed network' [...] which routes, reroutes and criss-crosses the Black Atlantic [...] [a] digital diaspora connecting the UK to the US, the Caribbean to Europe and Africa" (Eshun 1998, p. [-006]). In his essay Eshun used a peculiar page-numbering system beginning with negative numbers.

⁴ See Rockey Moore (2000) and Attimonelli (2008, pp. 108-126) for a detailed discussion on Afrofuturism, black sci-fi and the African-American diaspora.

communication technologies. The ever increasing mastery over technology on the part of blacks has been instrumental – for example in Detroit Techno music – for an original and oblique form of social activism. Moreover, in an age in which technology seems to erase racial distinctions, Afrofuturism aims to challenge the notion of a future without race, underlining the fact that race is still an important category even in the technologically-driven 21st century.⁵ The disenfranchisement from traditional versions of social activism has paved the way to an innovative method to fight racial discrimination using different weapons – not the civil activism à la *Black Panthers* that had been embraced since the second half of the last century, but a subversive technological hacking acting from within society.

As we have seen, Afrofuturism challenges the Western stereotype of African backwardness and the notion of Africa as a dystopia. The habitual exclusion of people of African descent from discourses regarding technology and the future is the result of intimidating and pessimistic predictions of the African social reality in the decades to come held by a part of the Western white establishment.⁶ As Eshun (2003, p. 289) puts it: “The field of Afrofuturism does not seek to deny the tradition of countermemory. Rather, it aims to extend that tradition by reorienting the intercultural vectors of Black Atlantic temporality towards the proleptic as much as the retrospective.” Hence, Afrofuturism still looks back at the past in order to re-evaluate it, but it primarily seeks to overcome this demoralising future scenario by showing a positive outlook on the potential of Africa and of the people of the African diaspora in the world.

To confirm the connection between technology, science fiction and the African diaspora, another important point made by Afrofuturism is the parallel between slaves, aliens and robots. Wondering why so few African-Americans wrote science fiction, as it is a genre where a close encounter with the “other” is central, Dery (2003, pp. 735-36) notes that “African-Americans are, in a very real sense, the descendants of alien abductees”. Indeed, the black slaves (and, decades later, those blacks marginalised in white-led societies) can be considered as sort of aliens, people belonging elsewhere, even robots performing mechanical jobs.⁷ Eshun (1998, p. 113) reminds us that writers such as LeRoi Jones (later known as Amiri Baraka) had used the slave-alien metaphor to highlight the marginal position of slaves as non-humans: “Not only physical and environmental aliens, but products of a completely alien philosophical system.” Similarly, Yaszek (2005, p. 301) stresses the political potential of the Afrofuturist discourse as it emerges in the work of science fiction novelists like Octavia E. Butler, who “appropriate[s] deracinated images of robots and cyborgs to specifically politicized ends, as tropes through which to explore the appropriation of black labour in the name of national or global progress”. Being outsiders, slaves – and, more generally, people of African descent – aliens and robots are all closely related in this kind of aesthetic, each one becoming a metaphor for the other.

⁵ Techno music is a kind of electronic dance music that has developed in Detroit, Michigan, since the 1980s thanks to the pioneering contribution of black American producers such as Juan Atkins, Derrick May and Kevin Saunderson. See also Nelson (2002, p. 1): “Forecasts of a utopian (to some) race-free future and pronouncements of the dystopian digital divide are the predominant discourses of blackness and technology in the public sphere”.

⁶ See Eshun (2002, pp. 290-92) for an analysis of Mark Fischer’s *SF* (science fiction) *capital* and of the “futures industry” responsible for this negative prediction of the future of Africa.

⁷ The word “robot” (from the Czech “robota”, meaning “drudgery”, “forced labour”) first appeared in the Czech playwright and novelist Karel Čapek’s dystopian play *R.U.R.*, or *Rossum’s Universal Robots* (1920), in which the robots did all the mechanical work until their rebellion led to the extinction of the human race. See also Yaszek (2002) and Goodman (2010, p. 167).

Moreover, novelist Toni Morrison argued that the African slaves were probably, and paradoxically, the first truly modern people because of the intensity of their experience. They experienced capture, theft, abduction and mutilation and had to suffer from existential homelessness, alienation, dislocation, and dehumanization, traumas that Nietzsche would define as typical of the condition of modernity.⁸ Slavery and modernity, two terms in alleged opposition, seem to overlap and offer new ways of considering the experience of the African diaspora. This assumption can be considered as a modern variation of the alienation that W. E. B. Du Bois described as the “sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others”, that is the seminal definition of “double consciousness” that would be so influential in pinpointing the condition of black people in a white-dominated society.⁹

As we have noticed, Afrofuturism’s holistic approach has led its practitioners to blur the boundaries of their creativity across several means of expression in order to convey a similar message. But what is this message? What is *new* about Afrofuturism? What are the languages of Afrofuturism?

2. The languages of Afrofuturism

It is useful to make a distinction between the precursors of Afrofuturism and the modern practitioners of this literary and cultural aesthetic. As we have seen, Afrofuturism was first defined by Dery in 1993, but its features seem to have been already latent in several previous works in a wide range of media. Among the forerunners, a preeminent position is occupied, as we will see below, by writers such as W. E. B. Du Bois, Ralph Ellison and Octavia E. Butler, musicians such as Sun Ra and George Clinton, and artists such as J. M. Basquiat. Eshun (1998; 2003), Nelson (2001; 2002), Yaszek (2005; 2006) and Rabaka (2006) set out to detect proto-Afrofuturist critical and poetical issues in their work in order to provide Afrofuturism with a canon, thus attributing authority and prestige to this cultural phenomenon. Moreover, Dery’s definition of Afrofuturism triggered an interesting debate and led to a growing awareness of the importance of Afrofuturist musicians, artists, filmmakers and writers. Many of them learned the lesson taught by the precursors and applied it to contemporary society. They began declaring themselves as Afrofuturist, and in their works they provided a new language in order to tackle the increasingly complicated frameworks of racial discrimination.¹⁰

It is now worth making a methodological point. By languages of Afrofuturism I will not refer to linguistic discourses, but instead, in a wider sense, I mean to indicate a communicative system involving different artistic forms such as music, the visual arts, cinema and literature. As the *Oxford English Dictionary* states, among the several meanings of the term “language” we find “the style of a literary composition” and also the “style or method of expression in a non-verbal artistic medium such as music, dance, or

⁸ See Gilroy (1993a, p. 178) and Eshun (2003, p. 288).

⁹ Du Bois (1903): “It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness,— an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.” For a detailed analysis of Du Bois’s contribution, see the excellent *Introduzione* by Sandro Mezzadra to Du Bois (2010, pp. 7-97).

¹⁰ See Taylor-Stone (2014) and Yongo (2014).

the visual arts.” As early as 1712, in the *Spectator*, Joseph Addison had already noticed that a literary form as the epic poem had its particular language: “It is not therefore sufficient, that the Language of an Epic Poem be Perspicuous, unless it be also Sublime”. In 1808 William Blake argued that also art had its own language: “To learn the Language of Art, ‘Copy for Ever’ is My Rule”. Moreover, worth mentioning is H. W. Longfellow’s 1835 poetical statement that “Music is the universal language of mankind”. As regards cinema, in the 1970s the French film theorist Christian Metz explicitly introduced the idea of “film language”, applying Ferdinand de Saussure’s theories of semiology to film.¹¹ Indeed, Afrofuturism craves for multimedia languages to tackle effectively its controversial issues. It is precisely the Afrofuturist attitude towards using different media to achieve a similar objective that makes it an ideal critical framework to reconsider the condition of people of the black diaspora in the new millennium. Here follows a brief discussion of some significant contributions to the different languages of Afrofuturism.

With regard to music, the seminal contribution of avant-garde jazz composer and poet Sun Ra (1914-1993) was extremely influential for later musicians and artists of different genres. Born Herman Blount in Birmingham, Alabama, in 1952 he changed officially his name to Le Sony’r Ra in reference to the Egyptian Sun God.¹² Sun Ra introduced himself as a visitor from Saturn, and is regarded as a pioneer in the use of technology in his band, the “Arkestra” – in order to convey his own fascination with outer space, Ra dubbed it with numerous evocative monickers such as “Myth Science Arkestra”, “Solar Arkestra”, “Astro Infinity Arkestra”, “Intergalactic Arkestra”, “Outer Space Arkestra” and so forth.¹³

Sun Ra’s cosmological project should not be considered as a mere escape from social reality due to a lack of political commitment. Quite the opposite: it was aimed at denouncing racial discrimination by underlining the potential of marginalised black people. Several hints seem to confirm this assumption. In 1966, Sun Ra and the Myth Science Arkestra supplied the live music accompaniment to *A Black Mass*, Amiri Baraka’s controversial play based upon the teachings of Elijah Muhammad, the leader of the Nation of Islam, the black activist movement.¹⁴ In this play, Baraka overturns the commonplace according to which whiteness is a symbol of goodness and blackness of wickedness, thus conveying the political message that positive images of beauty may be associated with blackness.

Moreover, oscillating between a sense of superiority and a commitment to the black cause, Ra wanted to be an alien because he was disgusted with the human race and with what he felt was a treacherous world:

¹¹ See “Language”, *Oxford English Dictionary* (2013) and Dobrian (1992).

¹² The abbreviated form “Sun Ra” soon became the official stage name. As Szwed (2000 [1997], p. 80) argues: “The changing of names is not unusual among black Americans; there is a tradition which on one hand draws from African precedents for giving sets of multiple names at birth, and on the other is part of a process of earning, inventing, or discovering new names throughout life. [...] Over the years this tradition of renaming was addressed by figures as different as Frederick Douglass, Booker T. Washington, Jean Toomer, Elijah Muhammad, Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin and Malcolm X”. See also Swiboda (2007, pp. 95-96) and Wilmer (1997, pp. 41-42).

¹³ Regarding Ra’s pioneering interest in outer space see Hollings (2000, p. 35): “By 1944, Sun Ra was already lecturing his musicians about space travel, rocketry and the possibilities of electrically produced sounds, while Stockhausen was describing compositions as ‘Star Music’ as early as 1952. At the start of the 1960s, both were using electronics to connect their audiences with the future; in other words, with space – which is also the past, when measured in light-years.”

¹⁴ Hollings (2000, p. 36). The album was released in 1968 on Baraka’s *Jihad* label.

I ain't part of America, I ain't part of black people. They went another way. Black people are carefully supervised so they'll stay in a low position. I left everything to be me, 'cause I knew I was not like them. Not like Black or white, not like Americans... black people, they back there in the past, a past that somebody manufactured for 'em. It's not their past, it's not their history.¹⁵

Therefore, Sun Ra's conflation of past (notably ancient Egypt), present and future (the pioneering use of synthesizers and electronic instruments, the interest in space travel) advocated racial uplift and paved the way to what black people *could* actually do. His utopian journey in outer space is also a political quest for a better place where Western imperialism and racism do not exist. As the liner notes to his *Greatest Hits* read: "These compositions are designed to convey the message of hope and happiness and a living message from the better world of tomorrow. This is universal music... a free language of joy".¹⁶ No wonder that his message was going to be received and put in practise by a plethora of other black musicians: George Clinton, Pharoah Sanders, John Coltrane, Jimi Hendrix, Miles Davis, to name just a few.

As we have seen, although in different guises, both Sun Ra and the Black Panthers shared a project of liberation for the black community. Daniel Kreiss (2008, p. 58) aptly underlines their different approaches, a utopian "mythic consciousness" for Sun Ra and a political "revolutionary consciousness" for the Black Panthers:

Sun Ra appropriated artifacts and technological metaphors to create what I call a "mythic consciousness" of technologically empowered racial identity that would enable blacks to recreate and invent technologies and construct Utopian societies on outer space landscapes. The Black Panthers redeployed and reconceived technologies to create a "revolutionary consciousness" with the end of political mobilization.



Fig. 1
Sun Ra



Fig. 2
George Clinton

The Detroit producer George Clinton was another musician deeply involved in outer space issues. His bands Parliament and Funkadelic explored the subtle territory between black music and racial issues in an innovative, ultra-modern framework. A landmark is Parliament's groundbreaking 1975 release *Mothership Connection*, whose sci-fi components place Clinton in a pioneering Afrofuturist context. Clinton assumed the alter ego of an alien called Starchild, who was sent down from the mothership to bring alien

¹⁵ Eshun (1998, pp. 154-55).

¹⁶ Gordon (2000).

Funk to Planet Earth. Starchild was an allegorical representation of freedom, a socially activist image of 1970s African-American society.¹⁷

Whereas Ra was mainly a jazz composer, Clinton combined outer space imagery with visceral, passionate and sexy funk music. What characterized Clinton was an even more flamboyant and theatrical approach, in which in a space age framework there was the coalescence in the lyrics and in the live shows of the band of such diverse characters as aliens, pimps, pushers, disco divas and so forth. As Clinton himself put it, he wanted to “put niggers in places that you don’t usually see ‘em [...] And nobody had seen ‘em in no spaceships! Once you’ve seen ‘em sittin’ on a spaceship like it was a Cadillac, then it was funny, cool.”¹⁸ Despite appearances, Clinton’s approach also seems to show a political message, implied by the fact that he put black people in places they were not supposed to be for complex historical reasons, notably the racial discrimination that had imbued the American society for decades. Apart from Sun Ra’s Arkestra futuristic jazz, Parliament-Funkadelic’s astrofunk and Lee “Scratch” Perry’s dub reggae, more records that show – in different ways – a peculiar combination of technology, extra-terrestrial and race issues included Jimi Hendrix’s *Electric Ladyland* (1968), George Clinton’s *Computer Games* (1982), Herbie Hancock’s *Future Shock* (1983) and Bernie Worrell’s *Blacktronic Science* (1993).¹⁹

A brief mention of the impact of Afrofuturism on the visual arts should also be made, in particular with regard to the work of Jean Michel Basquiat, whose striking contribution was decisive in legitimizing a progressive and futuristic vision of the African-American community. Paintings such as *Molasses* and *Pegasus*, for example, show characteristic black robots and represent inspired examples of Basquiat’s abstract expressionism. Afrofuturist themes can also be traced in the graffiti and performance art by Rammellzee, in the installations by Charles H. Nelson, in the photography of Renée Cox and Fatimah Tuggar, in the paintings with black astronauts by David Huffman, in the sculptures by Bodys Kingelez and in some comics and videogames.²⁰



Fig. 3
Jean Michel Basquiat: *Molasses*



Fig. 4
Jean Michel Basquiat: *Pegasus*

¹⁷ McLeod (2009, p. 399).

¹⁸ Hollings (2000, p. 37).

¹⁹ Dery (1993, p. 738). To this list may be added Detroit Techno music and the mythological sci-fi imagery of Drexciya, Hip Hop artists such as Afrika Bambaataa, Public Enemy, OutKast, Lil Wayne and Kanye West, Neo Soul singers such as Erykah Badu and Janelle Monae, DJ Spooky and many more.

²⁰ For further information on the impact of Afrofuturism on the visual arts see Dery (1993, p. 738), Shapiro (1997), White *et al.* (2001) and Hicks (2004).

With regard to cinema, we should reconsider Sun Ra and the film *Space is the Place*, released in 1974 and directed by John Coney. The alien Sun Ra lands on the planet Earth on a spaceship in order to “plan for the salvation of the human race”, in particular to save the black community in Oakland from oppression through his music. On answering a question put to him by a black youth, Ra claims very significantly:

I'm *not* real. I'm just like you. You don't exist in this society. If you did, your people wouldn't be seeking equal rights. You're not real. If you were, your people would have some status among the nations of the world. So we're both myths. I do not come to you as the reality, I come to you as the myth, because that's what black people are, myths.²¹

The above-mentioned alleged depoliticization implied by Ra's identification as a myth once again leads to a significant – if utopian – political commitment. Through his music, Ra actually conceived a mythology that counters the Western oppressive attitude that, more often than not, excluded black people from the best positions in society, thus making them “not real”. Indeed, the political message Ra is conveying here seems to be akin to what Ralph Ellison expressed in his novel *Invisible Man* (1952): both of them stressed the invisibility of black people in a white-led society. To confirm Ra's interest in race issues, as Val Wilmer (1997, p. 42) discovered in a 1966 interview, the composer was crucially influenced by *Sex and Race* by Jamaican journalist J.A. Rogers, an essay that had traced the African descent of several European royal families.²²

Mention must also be made of the hugely successful *The Matrix* trilogy, which was actually written by the black writer Sophia Stewart. Among the several messages conveyed by the series, it is interesting the way the actor Laurence Fishburne, playing the black character Morpheus, underlines the necessity of freeing one's mind in order to recognize oppression. In an Afrofuturist setting, the actor expresses the need for the African-American community to “wake up”²³. Among other films revealing Afrofuturist components, we could list *Born in Flames* (1983) by Lizzie Borden, *The Brother from Another Planet* (1984) by John Sayles and especially *The Last Angel of History* (1996) by John Akomfrah.

Finally, literature presents several authors whose work may be regarded as Afrofuturist. A groundbreaking contribution was the short story *The Comet* (1920) by William Edward Burghardt Du Bois. As is widely acknowledged, in the collection *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) Du Bois had already elaborated two critical concepts that would become very popular and influential, the “double consciousness” and the “color line”.²⁴ Both of them are clearly reflected in this short story, in which only a black man and a white woman survive an apocalyptic event. A comet fell on New York and destroyed everything but two survivors: Jim, a young black man, and Julia, an upper-class young white woman. If, up until the catastrophe, Jim represented a mere nothing for Julia, now, being her saviour, he obviously means much more to her. As a last man discriminated in a white-led society, Jim becomes the first man, a sort of Adam, the first of

²¹ Fawaz (2012, p. 1109).

²² Wilmer (1997, p. 42) also cites Cheik Anta Diop, the Senegalese author of *The African Origin of Civilisation*.

²³ Ciambelli (2007).

²⁴ See Du Bois (1920). As Du Bois (1903) put it: “This meaning is not without interest to you, Gentle Reader; for the problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color line.” Du Bois considered the color line as a scale that divides people according to the color of their skin and generates prejudices.

a new humanity where blacks and whites have the same rights and dignity. As Yaszek (2006) maintains, Du Bois seems to suggest that it will take a natural disaster to eradicate racism in America.

However, when Julia discovers that there are other survivors, including her father – who incidentally was quite worried that she had to share this experience with a “nigger” – the status quo is restored, and even Julia, who had appreciated Jim’s personal qualities and should be grateful to him for having rescued her, now ignores him and thus shows again the same prejudices as before. Frantz Fanon (1967 [1952], p. 114) strikingly exposed attitudes like this in *Black Skin, White Masks*: “The Negro is an animal, the Negro is bad, the Negro is mean, the Negro is ugly”.²⁵ Therefore, Du Bois treats this proto-Afrofuturist short story as a parable, in which the supernatural element of the fall of the comet allows him to make interesting speculations on racial discrimination. Although the fall of the comet could be interpreted as the destruction of the prejudices influencing the perception of the “other”, even before the appearance of the other survivors Julia seems to feel alone despite Jim’s presence:

She turned toward the door with a new fear in her heart. For the first time she seemed to realize that she was alone in the world with a stranger, with something more than a stranger, – with a man alien in blood and culture – unknown, perhaps unknowable. It was awful! She must escape – she must fly; he must not see her again. [...] She stopped. She was alone. Alone! Alone on the streets – alone in the city – perhaps alone in the world!²⁶

For her, Jim is an alien: he is just a “nigger”, and thus he is “invisible”, a metaphor that was going to be used later by Ralph Ellison in *Invisible Man*.

This novel tells the story of a young black man who becomes a leader of the movement for civil rights in the African-American community. Ellison uses science fiction language to underline the alienation of black people, describing them as “robots” with “laced up” minds, as “mechanical” men, as “machines inside the machine”.²⁷ The symbolism of the machine emphasizes the destruction of the individual through industry and technology, and highlights the lack of empathy and emotions in a society in which everyone is indifferent to the needs of the others. The novel thus deals with the condition of being alien and alienated – in fact, being black in America can be considered as a sort of science fiction experience.²⁸ The image of the typical black “invisible” alien is powerfully outlined by one of Ellison’s numerous characters, the vet, an outspoken black veteran, talking to Mr. Norton, a white millionaire who covertly hides his racist feelings behind a mask of philanthropy. The description below seems to be a fictional counterpart of the ideas expressed in the seminal critical works by Du Bois – notably his suggestion that being black means being “a problem” – a critical point later developed by Fanon:

[H]e has eyes and ears and a good distended African nose, but he fails to understand the simple facts of life. [...] He registers with his senses but short-circuits his brain. Nothing has meaning. He takes it in but he doesn’t digest it. [...] Behold! a walking zombie! Already he’s learned to repress not only his emotions but his humanity. He’s invisible, a walking personification of the Negative, the most perfect achievement of your dreams, sir! The mechanical man!²⁹

²⁵ See Rabaka (2006).

²⁶ Du Bois (1920).

²⁷ See Yaszek (2005, p. 305) and Ellison (2001 [1952], p. 36, p. 94, p. 217).

²⁸ See Washington (2001, p. 101) and Dery (1993, p. 764).

²⁹ Ellison (2001 [1952], p. 94).

Moreover, the mental openness of the protagonist embodies the typical figure of the Afrofuturist subject as someone who manifests not only a “double”, as Du Bois would put it, but a multiple, multifaceted consciousness, and this represents the first step towards the creation of a multiracial and egalitarian society for the future.³⁰ The protagonist also reveals those positive features of the black race epitomised by Aimé Césaire’s definition of “Négritude”, that controversial reaffirmation of the black identity that would be at first redefined by Sartre as an “anti-racist racism” and later criticised, among others, by Frantz Fanon and Wole Soyinka.³¹



Fig. 5
W. E. B. Du Bois

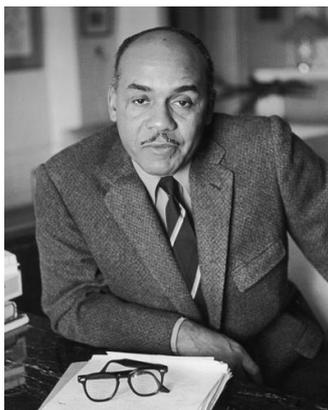


Fig. 6
Ralph Ellison



Fig. 7
Octavia E. Butler

Other writers that have significantly and decisively contributed to the development of Afrofuturism include Samuel R. Delany and Octavia E. Butler. They used technology to comment on the experiences of black people, to allow them to have more power to modify their present condition in order to imagine a different future. They narrated of worlds that have survived a catastrophe and of denied identities. They shared the vision that the lack of awareness of their culture and history had been the cause of the social status of black people in America. In fact, the history of black people is a history of alienation, almost as if they came from another planet, and science fiction represents a privileged vehicle to express this idea.³²

As Butler observed, in American society there are human variations of outer space aliens, “tangible aliens”, notably black people who had never been present in science fiction, or, if that ever happened, they were portrayed as bizarre or stereotyped characters.³³ In particular, her novel *Kindred* (1979) is a case in point. Butler’s pioneering work as a novelist was crucial in confronting straightforwardly racial politics, racial discrimination and slavery in an innovative way, involving time travel and other devices typical of science fiction, which thus becomes a new means to analyse (and criticise) the biased attitude towards people of the black diaspora. *Kindred* is about the story of a young

³⁰ Yaszek (2005, p. 308).

³¹ The term “Négritude” was first used in 1935 by Césaire in the third issue of *L’Étudiant noir*, a magazine which he had started in Paris with Léopold Senghor and Léon Damas. At least initially, Fanon considered Négritude as a cultural ideology without political effectiveness. Soyinka’s criticism was instead summed up by his famous remark made in 1964 at a conference in Berlin: “A tiger does not proclaim his tigritude, he pounces”. See also Césaire (1995 [1956]: pp. 47-49) and Sartre (2012 [1948]).

³² See Ciambelli (2007) and Hicks (2004).

³³ See Butler (2000 [1995], p. 415) and Nelson (2001: pp. 100-101).

mixed couple, the African-American Dana and the white Kevin. They live in 1970s Los Angeles, but for some inexplicable reason they end up in Maryland in the early 19th century to meet her ancestors: Rufus, a white slave holder, and Alice, an African-American slave. Time travel allows Dana to go back in time when Rufus calls for her help when his life is in danger. Quite ungratefully, like Julia's father in *The Comet*, also Rufus's parents show a hostile attitude towards her. After Dana rescued Rufus from drowning, he reports that his mother had described Dana as "just a strange nigger". As their conversation continues:

"That was a hell of a thing for her to say right after she saw me save her son's life."
 Rufus frowned. "Why?"
 I stared at him.
 "What's wrong?" he asked. "Why are you mad?"
 "Your mother always calls black people niggers, Rufe?"
 "Sure, except when she has company. Why not?" [...]
 "I'm a black woman, Rufe. If you have me to call me something other than my name, that's it."³⁴

Therefore, Dana is forced to face directly the evils of slavery that at that time was common practice. Butler powerfully describes the reality of slavery, and the temporal shifts on which the novel is based allow her to examine the influence of past events on the present. Rather than science fiction, Butler herself defined the novel as a "kind of grim fantasy", because she did not explain the scientific reasons that made time travel possible.³⁵ However, whatever its definition, *Kindred* is certainly an original document making science fiction functional to an innovative discussion of old discourses regarding slavery and racial discrimination. Other writers have shown similar ideas in their works, starting with a groundbreaking example such as the novel *Black No More* (1931) by George S. Schuyler, through *Mumbo Jumbo* (1972) by Ishmael Reed, *Beloved* (1987) by Toni Morrison, up to science fiction by Steve Barnes, Charles Saunders, Tananarive Due, Nalo Hopkinson and Anthony Joseph, especially the novel *The African Origins of the UFOs* (2009).³⁶

Despite their differences, these three works of fiction share a common goal, that is, showing the reader the alienation experienced by people of African descent in Western society using an arsenal of innovative tropes and narrative devices. *The Comet* is an emblematic story, one of the first examples of post-apocalyptic fiction in which a black man is the protagonist. In a prescient way, Du Bois introduced some components that would become typical of Afrofuturist fiction, notably the supernatural element of the fall of the comet. Whereas Du Bois uses the catastrophe of the comet to investigate whether the racial prejudices would be erased in an ideal world where a white woman needs a black man to be safe, in *Invisible Man* Ellison uses the futurist trope of the robot to emphasize the dehumanization of the exploited black "mechanical men". In *Kindred*, Butler overtly denounces slavery: even more, as she put it, "I was trying to get people to *feel* slavery"³⁷. In order to do so, time travel is perfectly appropriate to make the reader experience the evil of what it feels like being treated like a slave. The fact that an impossible event such as time travel could paradoxically happen to anyone heightens the

³⁴ Butler (1988 [1979], pp. 24-25).

³⁵ Snider (2004).

³⁶ See also the anthologies of Afrofuturist fiction and essays *Dark Matter* (2000) and *Dark Matter – Reading the Bones* (2004), both edited by Sheree R. Thomas, Hartmann (2012) and Womack (2013).

³⁷ Snider (2004). Butler's emphasis.

reader's sense of identification with the protagonist Dana, who lives a nightmarish experience powerfully described by Butler. Therefore, in each of these works, the futuristic and supernatural elements (the fall of the comet, the robot, time travel) show a new way to deal with old issues and reveal an innovative Afrofuturist perspective on the condition of people of the black diaspora.

In conclusion, in this paper I have introduced Afrofuturism, this interdisciplinary cultural phenomenon, first heading towards a definition, and then dwelling on consideration of its most significant artistic forms. As we have seen, the metaphoric dimension was crucial for Afrofuturist practitioners. The robot represents the prototype of the modern slave, displaced and oppressed by the colonialist white. The spaceship represents the slave ship navigating through a cosmos (the Atlantic ocean), towards an alien planet (America), where slavery and segregation manifest themselves.³⁸ But where does Afrofuturism go from here? If the above-mentioned disruption of the digital divide has now come true, a possible outcome could be attributing a positive meaning to the term "alien", which so far has predominantly been used as a synonym for outcast or misfit. Following the prescient intuition of Sun Ra, perhaps the "future" of Afrofuturism is closely related to the alternative meaning of this word, that is, somebody coming from somewhere other than Planet Earth. No longer a loser, the avant-garde coloured alien may be living proof of a new racial awareness. On this basis, Afrofuturism's multifaceted input conveys a message of modernity allowing us to reconsider the problem of racial discrimination in the new millennium.

³⁸ See Ciambelli (2007).

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