

## **The Past, Present and Future in Critical Afrofuturisms**

**- Jennifer Terry**

As contributors to this collection think imaginatively about the future, and what it might mean to be black in the future, an accompanying question is what kind of relation to the past will there be? In the area of culture termed Afrofuturism (a label first used in the 1990s), alongside an orientation towards futurity, artists and critics have negotiated this question in several ways. To what extent does a history of colonisation and slavery, which produced constructions of race and understandings of progress still felt today, inform images of the future, concepts of temporality and the envisioning of alternatives to ‘now’? In this piece I will focus on how a handful of Afrofuturist critics have addressed the interlinking of past, present and future.

The growth of science fiction and other projective visions in black diaspora culture in recent decades has called into question who the realm of the future belongs to, challenging the historic denial of narratives of modernity, technological advancement and the anticipatory to particular groups. Afrofuturist work tends to be concerned with the material constraints and discourses that have functioned to narrow black futures, and with identifying critical, revisionist, liberatory or creative counter narratives.<sup>1</sup> In an early definition, Mark Dery connects Afrofuturism to ‘speculative fiction’ but also describes it ‘more generally, [as] African-American signification that appropriates images of technology and a prosthetically enhanced future’ (Dery 1993, p. 180).

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<sup>1</sup> For example, we might think of imaginative work by the writers Octavia Butler, Samuel Delany and Nalo Hopkinson, and by the artists Ellen Gallagher, Edgar Arceneaux, and Wangechi Mutu, as well as the rich vein of Afrofuturist musical production.

Sometimes though the engagement is with ecological futures, with critique of capitalism and with alternative visions of sexuality and reproduction. Today it is more common for Afrofuturism to be recognised as emergent from Africa and the wider black diaspora, not just African America. Thinking more particularly about genre, the author Walter Mosley associates black sci-fi literature and film with possibility, the ability to see beyond existing normalised structures, commenting ‘The power of science fiction is that it can tear down the walls and windows, the artifice and laws by changing the logic, empowering the disenfranchised, or simply by asking, What if?’ (Mosley 1998, p. 32). While for Mosley this speculative ‘What if?’ is the utopian first step in changing the world, some Afrofuturist thinkers seek a more critical emphasis. As I will come back to, Kodwo Eshun defines Afrofuturism as ‘a program for recovering the histories of counter-futures created in a century hostile to Afrodiasporic projection’ (Eshun 2003, p. 301). And Mark Bould, rather than ‘merely celebrating Afrofuturism as resistance’, holds work under this label to account for not often enough aiming for ‘a transformation’ (Bould 2007, p. 182). Thinking about futurisms in terms of the relation to the past and present that they put forward gives another way into these possibilities, limitations and debates.

Alondra Nelson’s introduction to a 2002 special issue of *Social Text* offers a good starting point as it traces persistent patterns of black people being positioned as opposites to technological futures and also poses a powerful relation within Afrofuturism toward the past. Looking at the late 1990s digital boom in the US, Nelson identifies ‘two predominant discourses of blackness and technology in the public sphere’; these are ‘the promise of a placeless, raceless, bodiless near future enabled by technological progress’ and, on the other hand, discussion of ‘the digital

divide, a phrase that has been used to describe gaps in technological access that fall along lines of race, gender, region, and ability but has mostly become a code word for the tech inequities that exist between blacks and whites' (Nelson 2002, p. 1). What these two discourses have in common is 'the assumption that race is a liability in the twenty-first century' and also their grounding in earlier schemas arising from white European and European American colonialism and accounts of development. With the digital age in mind Nelson points out, 'In these politics of the future, supposedly novel paradigms for understanding technology smack of old racial ideologies. In each scenario, racial identity, and blackness in particular, is the anti-avatar of digital life. Blackness gets constructed as always oppositional to technologically driven chronicles of progress' (p. 1). In the terms of technoculture's promise of advancement and the new, we find echoes of earlier racialised narratives of enlightenment and progress. Yet Afrofuturist frameworks have the potential to expose or disrupt such oppositions, something facilitated by tracing the connections to historical constructions.

Considering the 'raceless future paradigm' and digital disembodiment, Nelson unpicks how 'Bodies carry different social weights that unevenly mediate access to the freely constructed identity' heralded by some critics in the 1990s (p. 1 & p. 3).<sup>2</sup> She also draws on Lisa Nakamura's work, which probes the reliance in tech adverts on 'imagery of exotic people and places' at the same time as they promise 'a liberated world of tomorrow' (p. 4). The marketing of technology still rests on a form of

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<sup>2</sup> Turning a critical eye on Allucquère Rosanne Stone's work on fragmented, multiplicitous selves in the virtual age, Nelson points out that it 'beg[s] the question of who would be able to so easily cast aside identity and, moreover, what was at stake in doing so' (p. 4).

alterity even as images of non-whites are ‘emancipated from past histories and contemporary socio-political context’ (p. 4). The parallel discourse of the ‘digital divide’ is encapsulated in an early twenty-first-century South African Land Rover ad, which finds its potency by setting off the sleek, tech-equipped vehicle against a traditionally dressed, bare breasted Himba woman. Nelson writes, ‘In this single image, we are presented with a visual metaphor for the ostensible oppositionality of race (primitive past) and technology (modern future)’; ‘the Freelander rapidly heads toward the future, leaving [the woman] in the past’ (p. 5). The novel status (of the virtual self, the high-tech society or, here, the latest cutting-edge product) is confirmed by the ‘primitiveness or [...] obsolescence of something or someone else’ (p. 6).<sup>3</sup>

In the face of this, Nelson seeks a technologically enabled future that is not ‘unmoored from the past and from people of color’ (p. 6). Her commentary on recent technoculture is alert, amidst the rhetoric of the possibilities of the Internet, to the links to a capitalist marketing logic as well as echoes of previous utopian heralding of new technology and modernity. Specifically she invokes the ‘older narrative [...] of technology and forgetting’ of ‘the futurism movement of the turn of the twentieth century’, citing Marinetti’s 1909 manifesto celebrating speed in modern life, transport and factory technology, and the creative destruction of war as well as of other industrial changes (p. 2).<sup>4</sup> Nelson explicates how in shaping his manifesto Marinetti

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<sup>3</sup> While discussion of the digital divide can draw attention to uneven access to computer technology, ‘this paradigm [...] falls all too easily in stride with preconceived ideas of black technical handicaps and “Western” technological superiority’ (p. 5).

<sup>4</sup> The Italian Filippo Tommaso Marinetti published ‘The Foundation and Manifesto of Futurism’ in 1909.

put forward a young, European, male subjectivity that was juxtaposed against ‘the past and the “feminine”’ and urged a turn forward, away from that past (p. 2). She looks to black culture for models of ‘a temporal orientation that seems to contradict discourses of the future predicated on either ignoring the past or rendering it as staid and stagnant’ (p. 7).<sup>5</sup> Afrofuturist works have the potential to ‘excavate and create original narratives of identity, technology, and the future’ while staying ‘grounded in the histories of black communities, rather than seeking to sever all connections to them’ (p. 9). Indeed, Nelson poses that theories growing out of the context of African diasporic history offer rich resources in terms of both ways of ‘turn[ing] the reified binary between blackness and technology on its head’, and defying ‘progressive linearity’ and associated attempts at detachment from the past (p. 6 & p. 8).

Kodwo Eshun’s take on past, present and future provides another key point of reference, Eshun being one of several critics who coined the term, and theorised about, Afrofuturism in the 1990s. In particular I will draw on his 2003 essay ‘Further Considerations of Afrofuturism’, which pulls together and reflects on ideas initially arising out of his music criticism a decade before. Eshun distinguishes between most science fiction, which he sees as far more conservative than the progressive vision often assigned to the genre, and the possibilities of Afrofuturism for critique and disturbance of enduring colonial orders.<sup>6</sup> Eshun is also helpful in terms of positioning

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<sup>5</sup> Nelson looks at Ishmael Reed’s novel *Mumbo Jumbo* (1972) in terms of an understanding of ‘a usable past [that] runs counter to the futurism of the early twentieth century’ (p. 7).

<sup>6</sup> ‘[S]cience fiction is neither forward-looking nor utopian’, and is more invested in, and reflective of, the present, according to Eshun (Eshun 2003, p. 290).

black concerns with the future in relation to memorial and historical imperatives in diasporic culture.

Starting from racism's denial to 'black subjects [of] the right to belong to the enlightenment project', Eshun proposes that Black Atlantic intellectual culture has been overdetermined by the 'need to demonstrate a substantive historical presence' (Eshun 2003, p. 287). The resultant emphasis on a cultural project of recovery, the accumulation of 'countermemories that contest the colonial archive', not only situates colonisation and slavery 'as the founding moment of modernity', but also has meant that a focus on the future, 'the manufacture of conceptual tools that could analyze and assemble counterfutures[,] was understood as an unethical dereliction of duty' (p. 288). Eshun argues that 'the vigilance that is necessary to indict imperial modernity must be extended into the field of the future' (p. 288). Indeed, if the future is seen as 'a chronopolitical terrain', as hostile and in need of contestation as the past, then 'inquiry into production of futures becomes fundamental, rather than trivial' (p. 289). Eshun's case for attention to counter futures arises out of a different angle on relations to the past to Nelson's, yet does not mean leaving counter memory behind but rather an orientation 'towards the proleptic as much as the retrospective' (p. 289).<sup>7</sup>

His call is underpinned by an urgent sense of the late capitalist twenty-first century, representing an adjustment to Eshun's earlier work on Afrofuturism. Alert to corporate force, he points out that today 'power [...] functions through the

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<sup>7</sup> Eshun sums this up: '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' (p. 289).

envisioning, management, and delivery of reliable futures’ as well as through the ongoing ‘dissimulation of the imperial archive’ (p. 289). We are in a ‘cultural moment when digitopian futures are routinely invoked to hide the present in all its unhappiness’ and Africa, for example, has become the site of overdetermining doomsday predictions; both of these discourses work to reinforce the powerful, who ‘draw power from the futures they endorse, thereby condemning the disempowered to live in the past’ (p. 289 & p. 291).<sup>8</sup> Eshun also traces ‘positive feedback between future-oriented media and capital’, between ‘the futures industry’ and ‘the desire for a technology boom’ (p. 290).<sup>9</sup> Through this understanding of the present grip of a futures industry and predatory and uneven futures, he highlights the high stakes in shaping counter futures and in problematising technodeterminism (p. 291).

According to Eshun, ‘Afrofuturism, then, is concerned with the possibilities for intervention within the dimension of the predictive, the projected, the proleptic, the envisioned, the virtual, the anticipatory and the future conditional’ (p. 293). He suggests alternative appeals to the future and visions that call progress into question can be found in various forms of ‘black vernacular expression’ (p. 293). These articulations are ‘critical and utopian’, making visible ‘competing world views that seek to reorient history’ (p. 292 & p. 297). Eshun poses a suggestive mode of chronopolitical intervention: ‘By creating temporal complications and anachronistic episodes that disturb the linear time of progress, these futurisms adjust the temporal

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<sup>8</sup> Eshun writes, ‘these developmental futurisms function as the other side of the corporate utopias that make the future safe for industry [...] Africa is always the zone of the absolute dystopia’ (p. 292).

<sup>9</sup> Eshun defines the futures industry as ‘the intersecting industries of technoscience, fictional media, technological projection, and market prediction’ (p. 290).

logics that condemned blacks to prehistory' (p. 297). This recalls Nelson's dismantling of binaries of race and technology, and disrupts the dominant narrative of forward moving advancement. Eshun also considers the potential of recasting science fiction (as manifest in music, visual art etc. not only literature) 'in the light of Afrodiasporic history' (p. 299). His call for a turn to the field of the future is not separate from attempts to challenge the imperial archive and is firmly grounded in the politics of the present. He writes, 'Afrofuturism may be characterized as a program for recovering the histories of counter-futures created in a century hostile to Afrodiasporic projection' (p. 301). In a new twenty-first century in the grip of the futures industry, it can also further 'the critical work of manufacturing tools capable of intervention within the current political dispensation' (p. 301).

Picking up on Eshun's mention of Afrofuturism's complicating perspective for science fiction, Mark Bould's introduction to a 2007 special issue of *Science Fiction Studies* offers a related angle on the genre. Bould outlines how mid twentieth-century science fiction often advanced a vision of a colour blind society linked to the invocation of a long expanse of time: 'From the 1950s onwards, sf in the US magazine and paperback tradition postulated and presumed a color-blind future, generally depicting humankind "as one race"' and leaving 'questions of race [...] as marginalized as black characters' (Bould 2007, p. 177). Here a projected future, temporally distant, involves the evasion of contemporary inequalities and struggles. In following, technologically exciting decades 'The space race showed us which race space was for' Bould writes (p. 177). He points out that even 'the satirical sf tale in which the alien or the android is the subject of prejudice, whatever its merits, also avoids direct engagement with the realities of racialized [...] oppressions' (p. 179).



Bould challenges ‘the supposedly more objective stance enabled by [science fiction’s] affiliations to science’ and ‘the criticism of the genre that accepts the genre’s own self-image’; ‘by presenting racism as an insanity that burned itself out [...] sf avoids confronting the structures of racism and its own complicity in them’ (pp. 179-180). Parallels can be drawn between the later technoculture promises as looked at by Nelson and Bould’s critique of science fiction futures that perpetuate historic hierarchies by erasing them from view.

Like both Nelson and Eshun, Bould identifies powerful counter narratives in Afrofuturism. Afrofuturist cultural creations challenge the mainstream science fiction tradition described above by recognising, in Mark Sinker’s words, as quoted by Bould, that for black people ‘Apocalypse already happened’ (p. 180). Such creations are able to put forward ‘a much more varied and complex set of relationships between domination and subordination, whiteness and color, ideology and reality, technology and race’ (p. 182). If historically technology has been coupled with discourses of white European advancement, then Bould endorses Dery’s definition of Afrofuturism as black ‘signification that appropriates images of technology and a prosthetically enhanced future’ (quoted by Bould 2007, p. 182). However, Bould also gestures toward the need for a reoriented understanding of ‘technology’; ‘only within a certain ideological field is black experience the opposite of technoculture’ and ‘sf and sf studies have much to learn from the experience of technoculture that Afrofuturist texts register across a wide range of media’ (p. 182).

Bould’s last turn involves cautionary reference to the European futurism of the early twentieth century, thus interlocking with Nelson’s distinction between the

consciousness of the past in Afrofuturism and rejection of such in the earlier movement. Bould writes, 'The future proposed by Marinetti and the Italian Futurists was young and masculine, obsessed with speed and the foreclosure of the past' (p. 182). Not only does Bould, like Nelson, emphasise the importance of connection to diasporic history,<sup>10</sup> but he also calls for futurist visions that are truly alternative to our present. He warns that 'in a postmodern multiculturalist age' it would be easy 'to fall into the trap of merely celebrating Afrofuturism as resistance' (p. 182). Indeed, 'Afrofuturism tends towards the typical cyberpunk acceptance of capitalism as an unquestionable universe and working for the assimilation of certain currently marginalized peoples into a global system' (p. 182). Instead Bould urges more attention to 'transformation', not acceptance of a logic that affirms a slightly more inclusive privilege in the capitalist system. This recalls Eshun's focus on critical tools and the need to contest the futures industry, in which market predictions, corporate control of futures and technological development are all bound up together. Such technodeterminisms, and also complicit science fictions, can be laid bare through the foregrounding of 'the intersection of race, technology, and power' (p. 182).

Considering the perspectives of Alondra Nelson, Kodwo Eshun and Mark Bould, we find a suspicion of utopian claims and a distinction drawn between earlier futurisms and Afrofuturism. Nelson cautions against the 'forgetting' that can accompany discourses of technology and traces patterns of the new and futurist being set off

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<sup>10</sup> Via Sherryl Vint, Bould cites Octavia Butler's time travel science fiction *Kindred* (1979) and Toni Morrison's neo slave narrative *Beloved* (1987) as exemplifying the generative intertwining of past, present and future. These texts 'initially retreat from the future so as to better understand how to approach it' (p. 183).

against blackness, the ‘ostensible oppositionality of race (primitive past) and technology (modern future)’ (Nelson 2002, p. 5). Nelson also offers a positive definition of Afrofuturism, emergent from the listserv that she started in the late 1990s: ‘African American voices with other stories to tell about culture, technology and things to come’ (p. 9). Eshun, too, emphasises counter futures, although his call for attention to the field of the future arises not only from marginalisation within dominant accounts, but also from the need to reorient following a memorial and historical imperative in black cultural and intellectual work. Eshun poses the future as contested terrain in the twenty-first century, seeking out chronopolitical interventions that can disrupt a temporal logic of progress tied into a colonial order and capital. Eshun’s sense of the present futures industry complements Bould’s critique of cyberpunk’s failure to question a capitalist system. For Bould Afrofuturism can productively problematise science fiction genres, whose tradition avoided tackling racist structures. All three Afrofuturist critics examined here advocate a grounding of ideas in black diasporic history, that is, they reject the severance of connection with the past that often comes with futurist turns. Past, present and future have to be understood together or rather, as Greg Tate puts it, ‘you can be backward-looking and forward-thinking at the same time’ (Tate in Dery 1994, p. 211).

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