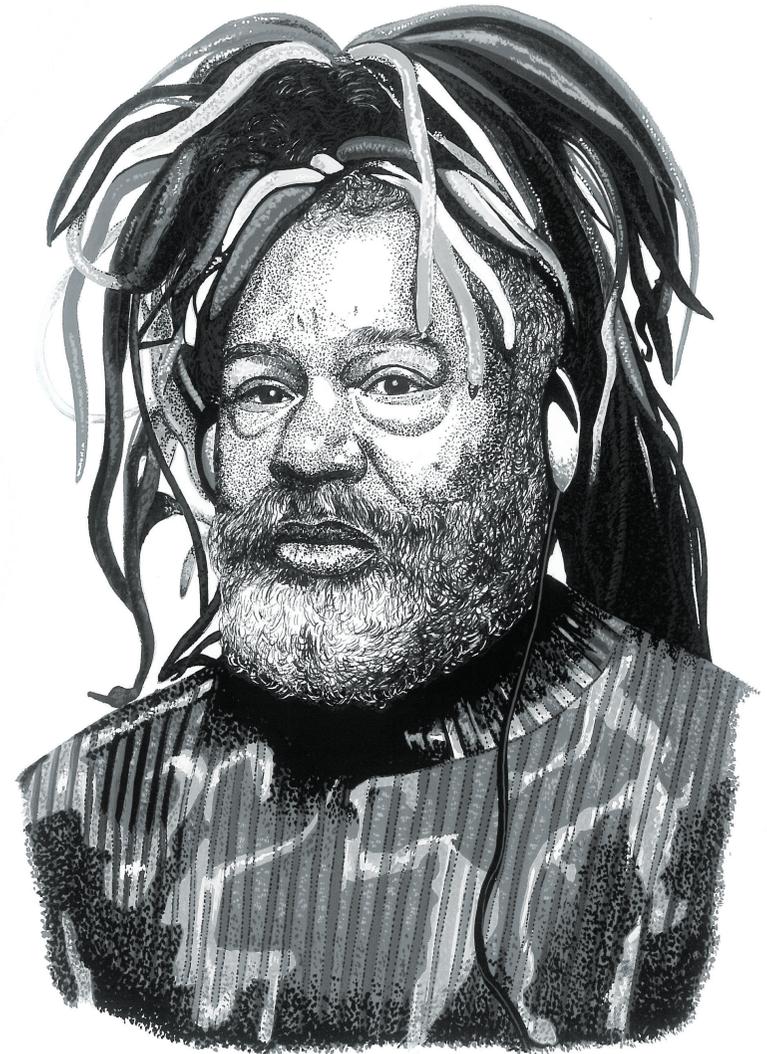


AFROFUTURISM: THE QUESTION OF THE FUTURE

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I could never really relate to Star Wars. I didn't get it - it just looked the same as any old war story but set in a desert, with robots. But I was into the solar system - or the idea of it. 'Moon' was my first word, my dad holding me up to the window and pointing out this wondrous luminous circle. In the playground at elementary school, I was not interested in skipping, or football, or whatever toy was the new rage; I started the Flying Saucer Club instead, convinced I had seen a U.F.O. land in the field next door. And, yes, I did have recruits: four of us and, if someone demonstrated the capacity of seeing a flying guinea pig, they would be invited to join too.

I loved school because I could ask questions, but the answers were always dull; and art - well, that was just pretty pictures, right? It wasn't until I experienced a graffiti space-scape in Sheffield that I was transported to worlds at once exotic and familiar. These canvases may have been factory walls, and the paint from an aerosol can, but I walked away coated in their shine and aura, my world and vision transformed. Here was a place I could connect to people who shared my stories - language making possible a way for me to escape those realities that excluded me.

These people called themselves writers - not artists - scribing visual stories, subconscious and continuous. And hip-hop was the same, technology remaking technology for its own ideology and purpose, to raise a bold new generation. It may be in the form of vinyl blaring in a disused council flat, but the vision was there. This was the only magic I was interested in. All of it - the colours, the sounds, the futuristic space-scapes and crazy monikers - drew me in. It wasn't even belonging that fascinated me; it was the actual tribe and their remaking of the world: past, present and future. It appealed to the thrown-away youth of my post-industrial Sheffield, over to New York and everywhere in between.

At this time, I had no idea what Afrofuturism was. Digital Underground was as nuts and yet as essential to me

as The Banana Splits TV show, with its strange, silly wisdom and energy. George Clinton and Parliament was a vocabulary utterly beyond me; I had no means of understanding it (aside from the beat's undeniable effect on my backbone), but spending time with graffiti legends Vulcan and Phase II in the 1990s changed that. In their company between London and New York, they exposed me to a way of thinking that I initially thought was crazy, yet they possessed a logic I couldn't contradict. They didn't follow the normal parameters of science or art, and there was no comparison to their level of commitment in the working world I knew. They would use polystyrene blocks on subway trains - Vulcan created a 3D sculpture with them on a subway car (and this was in the 1980s, long before art schools were even considering that inner city kids might have imaginations, talent or execution skills), as well as invent strange glues and sketch bizarre narratives. There were no limits to their resourcefulness or their imaginations. Writers - the real ones - were never limited to one medium or one place. Spray paint, markers, walls, vinyl, plastic, garbage trucks, tubing - if it was available, it could be appropriated for purpose: the essence of hip-hop Afrofuturistic technology. What distinguished them, however, was an inclusive warm logic and transformative energy missing from more traditionally celebrated, gallery approved art forms. Here was something so robust and so real that it became the only art form and ideology I wanted to follow - to such an extent that I printed and distributed the independent graffiti and hip-hop zine *The Real State* to celebrate it. I just wanted everyone to know about this thing I had found.

Yet my naive passion imploded as my world was appropriated by the masses, modified to fit the values and objectives of the various business models it began to serve. I lost the precious vision the culture had granted me after a couple of years spent in California, remaining only in my scripts and poems where black spacemen, milk

floats and nonsense continued to dominate. When speaking with George Clinton and Parliament, I quickly realised they're not as insane as I thought when I was twenty; they are thoroughly aware of how the current systems and protest cultures operate, but they choose to live as if their history, present and future aren't controlled by it.

Artists who have long been exploring and developing ideas inspired by Afrofuturism across an array of mediums include writers Olivia E. Butler, Michael Bennet, Aisha Harris and Samuel Delany, the jazz musician Sun-Ra, as well as artists Walé Oyéjidé, Janelle Monáe and the ubiquitous Beyoncé. But there are others too, opening eyes and vistas to new audiences, with multi-disciplinary artist and curator Krista Franklin claiming that Harriet Tubman was one of the first Afrofuturists, stating: "She led folks to a future freedom by following a star in the sky and using the technology of a gun." This viewpoint sits jarringly alongside the artist Martine Syms's 2013 wry essay "The Mundane Afrofuturist Manifesto", which subverts sci-fi tropes from aliens and spaceships to actually reimagining the future by asking: "Earth is all we have. What will we do with it?". Syms gently mocks the superficial aspects of Afrofuturism, whilst suggesting a better way to demonstrate its call:

"The chastening but hopefully enlivening effect of imagining a world without fantasy bolt-holes: no portals to the Egyptian kingdoms, no deep dives to Drexciya, no flying Africans to whisk us off to the Promised land. The possibilities of a new focus on black humanity: our science, technology, culture, politics, religions, individuality, needs, dreams, hopes, and failings. The surge of bedazzlement and wonder that awaits us as we contemplate our own cosmology of blackness and our possible futures."

She even juxtaposes a quote from the prolific civil rights activist and sociologist W. E. B. DuBois with lyrics from Wu Tang's

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own Ol' Dirty Bastard's 1999 track "Rollin' Wit You" to illustrate her point:

"The understanding that our "two-ness" is inherently contemporary, even futuristic. DuBois asks how it feels to be a problem. Ol' Dirty Bastard says 'If I got a problem, a problem's got a problem 'til it's gone.'"

With this parallel so succinctly drawn, it's clear to see that elements of Afrofuturism have long existed within hip-hop's identity and aesthetics: from the aforementioned Digital Underground, via TLC (especially their "No Scrubs" video), Outkast, Erykah Badu, Lauryn Hill, N.E.R.D, The Roots, and Flying Lotus are but a few examples. Its influence is everywhere in the genre, from the prominence of futuristic and space inspired monikers, album titles, iconography and fashion choices, not to mention a plethora of music videos (Missy Elliott and Da Brat's "Sock It 2 Me" instantly comes to mind). Tricia Rose's seminal 1994 book *Black Noise* dissected hip-hop's deep science nearly four decades ago (a text which should be essential reading for anyone serious about hip-hop, funk or music full stop) and in it, she hints at the thorough technology, maths and science beyond the sonics, lyrics and patterns which

universally became recognized as beautiful. All because they worked together. They crystallized a thought or emotion. Hip-hop points to the fact that Afrofuturism may not just be a genre; it may be understating a better way of being.

Afrofuturism is not a political movement; it is actually a way for all people to perceive a richer, fuller life. A world where black people are normative and not oppressed, where time is non-linear, and where colour and sound technology are configured according to a more integrated science. This is good for everyone. It is good for our brains, our souls, our bodies, our communities. Afrofuturism is not about separatism; it is about experiencing phenomena in a deeper, more connected way.

But what does this mean in real terms? Hip-hop needs to step up. Its success was a result of the science of sound - technology which created a specific effect on human emotions. But we are losing sound and colour with every compressed song we hear through our earbuds and every JPEG file sent across the internet. Music has been reduced to the calibrations of computers, computers which cannot capture the full spectrum of sound, ever. Computers cannot imagine; they can only develop algorithms for a current thought. We built the technol-

ogy and now the technology builds us - but at a reduced capacity. What is the point in recording sound if we are not *really* recording it? Are we just doing it for a commercial exchange? And how are we devaluing our culture by doing so? If the quality of sound doesn't matter, what does? I don't listen to compressed sound, it doesn't nourish me, it's just muzak. I don't feel the sound as a physical energy anymore.

Generations since the 1990s have grown up not knowing what a sound vibration really means, or why it matters. Vibrations were the backbone of sound systems and hip-hop. The same with the break, the mathematics of hip-hop, the Fibonacci sequence, the repetition. Hip-hop is resorting to models of symphonic arrangement instead of the mathematical purity on which it was built. It's the biggest challenge we face. It's time for hip-hop to stop playing fancy dress and to get real, building a futuristic technology that can support the vision it claims to bring - the science and aesthetics of Afrofuturism - otherwise we cannot blame anyone but ourselves for erasing it out of discourse.

Afrofuturism is the answer but we need to find the right questions to unlock it if we want the vision of a better future to become real.

FURTHER READING:

The wonder of Afrofuturism is that its ideology and politics are not based on reductionism, but expansion! Let these books help blow your mind to better places, spaces and ways of being:

Afrofuturism 2.0: The Rise of Astro-Blackness edited by Reynaldo Anderson + Charles E. Jones

Binti by Nnedi Okorafor

Dark Matter: A Century of Speculative Fiction from the African Diaspora edited by Sheree R. Thomas

Empire Star + The Jewels of Apor by Samuel R. Delany

Lilith's Brood [trilogy] by Octavia Butler

Mothership: Tales from Afrofuturism and Beyond edited by Bill Campbell + Edward Austin Hall.

Octavia's Brood: Science Fiction Stories from Social Justice Movements by Walidah Imarisha

The Fifth Season: The Broken Earth, Book 1 by N. K. Jemisin

The Intuitionist by Colson Whitehead

The Portable Promised Land: Stories + Soul City: A Novel by Touré