



THIRD STONE

Annotated Bibliography

Print Media: Articles

Dery, M. (1994). Black to the Future: Interviews with Samuel R. Delany, Greg Tate, and Tricia Rose.” In M. Dery (Ed.), *Flame Wars: The Discourse of Cyberculture* (pp. 179-222). Durham, NC: Duke UP.

Considered a seminal work in defining Afrofuturism at least during the twentieth century, this article poses a number of core questions regarding what Dery considers the low participation of African-American authors in the realm of science fiction (p. 179). He wonders, for instance, whether it is possible for such authors to consider counter-futures for the Black community given the not-so-distant history of enslavement and the ongoing struggle for African-American peoples to reclaim any traces of their histories (p. 180). These stumbling blocks, however, cannot remain obstacles for African and African-descended peoples, who Dery believes have necessary stories to tell, aided by art, technoculture, music, literature, and science to transform not only how we view Black cultures in the present but also the potential futures, distant or near, for people of color across the diaspora.

Throughout the article, Dery cites several examples that he considers exemplary of Afrofuturism that fall into the realms of science fiction, speculative fiction, or graphic storytelling, such as *Icon*—a narrative set in 1849 during the antebellum period. *Icon* depicts extraterrestrial technology that has given birth to a seemingly unstoppable Black hero who, in time, uses his powers to address the deep-seated struggles and pain of the world by uplifting the persecuted and oppressed within our society. Such narratives are inherently radical for their time, reportraitizing Black figures as heroes and heroines—as subject versus object—in a society that historically has worked to have such figures silenced or fundamentally erased. Dery also cites the example of Rammellzee’s Gasholeer, whose Afrofuturist exoskeleton was equipped with pyrotechnic devices used to wipe away the poverty and the quintessential socioeconomic divides that further fractured this consistently divided world. Both figures, equipped with the tools of science and evolving technology, affect positive social change with longstanding effects for members of the Black community at large, replacing the white savior figure.

Based upon these central examples, it is clear that Dery views Afrofuturism as a gateway to envision more positive futures for African and African-descended peoples, though his study focuses more on the U.S. context, unfortunately ignoring the invaluable work being done outside of the United States that can also be considered part of an Afrofuturist endeavor or shaped by the Black Fantastic. Still, Dery’s essay, which is largely credited for coining the term, *Afrofuturism*, is helpful in locating some of the essential features of Afrofuturism that we see in those works today. For example, Afrofuturism is aimed at relocating Black characters from the lower-class status afforded them for much of U.S. history, as many of the central characters receive superhuman capabilities that make them

agents of social change. Science, once weaponized to justify the belief that African-American peoples were inferior beings, now has become a tool to lead their sociocultural advancement—a new racial uplift movement of sorts.

For the remainder of the essay, Dery engages in critical conversation with Samuel R. Delany, Greg Tate, and Tricia Rose to gain insight into what he appropriately describes as the “largely unexplored psychogeography of Afrofuturism” (p. 187). For Delaney, the realm of science fiction is laden with potential to explore political questions undergirding Black oppression and disenfranchisement in the United States while pushing the depths of reader engagement on these central issues. It is a vehicle for exploring the very concept of nation itself. But at the same time, one of the core elements of Afrofuturist works is that they are often on the margins and therefore operating at a raw and more honest level because of it. Tricia Rose expands upon these insights particularly as it relates to music. She argues that if in works of Afrofuturism we have come to understand the machine as dynamic, as always looking beyond the current historical or technological moment, then music such as hip-hop does the same. It looks toward the “postindustrial landscape” specifically and provides its creators the necessary platform to “attempt microscopic responses to things that appear in their landscapes” (p. 213).

Together, these viewpoints suggest that the futuristic visions of Afrofuturism, while slow to develop, are important because they reflect the change that oppressed peoples want to see within the world and possible avenues through which that change potentially can be realized. And while the artists who do this work are often at the margins, at least for a point in time, their work has significant ramifications in shaping the way that we think about critical topics like nation, oppression, non-conformity, technology, and self—insights that we are now only beginning to thoroughly appreciate sometimes decades after these key figures’ deaths. That only reinforces how forward-thinking these figures such as Jimi Hendrix were, envisioning counter-futures that in many cases are our present realities, begging the question, “What will be our future reality next?”

Christopher Allen Varlack, 2019

English, D. & Kim, A. (2013). Now we want our funk cut: Janelle Monae’s Neo-Afrofuturism. *American Studies* 52(4), pp. 217-230. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/ams.2013.0116> .

English and Kim (2013) map the terrain of twentieth-century Afrofuturism using George Clinton and Parliament/Funkadelic as a cultural and musical prime meridian for laying out the territory of P-Funk, which is readily accepted as an exemplar of 1970s and 80s Afrofuturism. P-Funk, or pure funk, characterized as much by its bass lines and fusion of rock and jazz as for its outrageous futuristic characters and extraterrestrial mythology, is a liberatory genre that susses out the actualized potential of art to empower the disenfranchised. However, English and Kim suggest that P-Funk’s liberation narrative, framed as uncut or unfiltered funk, is steeped in a masculinist and heteronormative aesthetic; by extension, they propose, twentieth-century Afrofuturism, too, is concerned with liberating only some of the people from some of the oppressions. Thus, English and Kim remap Afrofuturism, supplanting George Clinton with Janelle Monae who “has undertaken a musical, lyrical, visual, performative, and theoretical investigation into, and destabilization of,

not only race and gender, but also sexuality, color, and class” (pp. 218). They deem Monae’s brand of Afrofuturism as neo-Afrofuturism.

Neo-Afrofuturism and Monae “[honor], yet also [expand] upon, earlier forms of Afrofuturistic funk” (English & Kim, 2013, p. 217). In *The Metropolis* (2007), *The Android* (2010), and *The Electric Lady* (2013), Monae establishes a mythology and language that governs the universe of her imagination, lays claim to outer space origins, and gives voice to difference and oppression through the android Cindi Mayweather. English and Kim read Monae’s work on these EPs and the related videos and live performances as intertextual mosaics and as new art (p. 219). Elements of Sun Ra’s and George Clinton’s influences are apparent in Monae’s sound, look, and mythos. However, English and Kim observe, Monae is not beholden to Clinton’s funk aesthetic, nor is she limited by the androcentric gaze of P-Funk. While the gender-bending costumes of P-Funk performers “stretched notions of the black masculine, they neither addressed nor transformed the black feminine” (p. 221). Monae’s multifaceted jookin’ dance style and tuxedoed performances challenge and expand possibilities for women performers. Monae’s neo-Afrofuturism makes space for women and for androgyny; it questions and destabilizes hegemonic identity categories.

Although P-Funkers used synthesizers, keyboards, amps, and wah pedals to create their Afrofuturistic sound, the performers relied heavily on traditional instruments and preferred a less produced final product. In contrast, Monae, English and Kim argue, embraces a “highly cut” or technologically enhanced sound; such a preference makes Monae’s EP’s more “commercially oriented” (p. 223). Neo-Afrofuturism, too, might be more produced or manipulated than its predecessor. English and Kim explain that Monae, and by extension neo-Afrofuturism, embraces and critiques twenty-first century technoculture. Monae serves as mediator “between technoculture and live performance” (p. 228). Her performances--live and recorded--are slick because she has the ability to ground herself in the past and to move forward into creative and technological spaces that allow her to actualize power in ways not available to P-Funkers. Social media and artist independence from record labels are two next-century phenomena that free up artists like Monae to be more expressive.

This article uses Monae’s work as a starting point for a reconsideration of Afrofuturism in the twenty-first century. The art Monae and others are creating today certainly has the contours of what we recognize as Afrofuturism. However, the end products seem to be mapping out a very different terrain.

Seretha D. Williams, 2019