Why Afrofuturism? Why Today?

Afrofuturism posits a simple observation: the experience of being black in a white supremacist U.S. society mirrors the alienating, estranging, and often horrifying stories found in science fiction. Afrofuturists understand that being abducted from a homeland, transported to a strange new world, and exploited by slave labor are in and of themselves forms of dystopia and dehumanization. Afrofuturists understand that in a post-slavery U.S., things are no better. Today, the ‘peculiar institution’ that was slavery has been replaced by mass incarceration, racial profiling, state-sanctioned racial violence, and crushing economic subjugation, all of which have led to the rise of what bell hooks calls a “devastated black industrial working class” whose lives are increasingly “characterized by continued displacement, profound alienation and despair.” As Greg Tate succinctly put it in the 1994 essay that coined the term Afrofuturism: “Black people live the estrangement that science fiction writers imagine.”

Yet Afrofuturism does not end at dystopia. It may begin there, but as Parable of the Sower, arguably one of Butler’s most dystopian novels, makes clear: “The only lasting truth is change.” Throughout Butler’s work, and in several of the stories in Octavia’s Brood, tales of a police state on steroids, mass incarceration, labor exploitation, environmental disaster, and rampant xenophobia often give way to narratives of resilience, survival, resistance, and, because we’re talking science fiction, transformation. This is the appeal of science fiction to people of color: it not only defamiliarizes reality, it offers a space to imagine something different.

To cite Samuel R. Delany, once Butler’s teacher and largely considered the most influential black SF writer of the twentieth century:

We need images of tomorrow; and our people need them more than most. Without an image of tomorrow, one is trapped by blind history, economics, and politics beyond our control. One is tied up in a web, in a net, with no way to struggle free. Only by having clear and vital images, of the many alternatives, good and bad, of where one can go, will we have any control over the way we may actually get there in a reality tomorrow will bring all too quickly. (Starboard Wine, 1984)

What does speculative/visionary fiction have to do with social justice?

Walidah Imarisha answers this question in her introduction to Octavia’s Brood, so I’ll defer to her first before elaborating. She observes that whenever “we try to envision a world without war, without violence, without prisons, without capitalism, we are engaging in speculative fiction.” Whenever we dare to imagine and craft alternatives to our status quo, we are practicing social activism. If the stories we tell ourselves and each other shape our society, it stands to reason that storytelling in and of itself is a site of power. If, as SF critic James Gunn has argued “science fiction is the genre of change,” then what better form of storytelling than SF is most equipped for social reform and radical activism?

Resources that might help faculty from diverse disciplines work effectively with the science fiction of multicultural U.S. writers:

Journal Articles & Special Edition on “Afrofuturism”:
- Bould, Mark and Rone Shavers, eds. “Special Issue on Afrofuturism.” Science Fiction Studies. 34.2 (2007)

Books:
• Sandra Grayson, Visions of the Third Millennium: Black Science Fiction Novelists Write the Future (2002)
• Ingrid Thaler, Black Atlantic Speculative Fictions: Octavia E. Butler, Jewelle Gomez, and Nalo Hopkinson (2014)
• Ytasha Womack, Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture (2013)
• Bill Campbell & Edward Hall, eds. Mothership: Tales from Afrofuturism and Beyond (2013)
• Reynaldo Andersen et al, eds. Afrofuturism 2.0: The Rise of Astro-Blackness (2017)
• Marleen Barr, ed. Afro-Future Females: Black Writers Chart Science Fiction’s Newest New-Wave Trajectory (2018) [Fiction and Non-Fiction]
• Sheree Thomas, Ed. Dark Matter: A Century of Speculative Fiction from the African Diaspora (2000) [Fiction and Non-Fiction]
• Sheree Thomas, Ed. Dark Matter: Reading the Bones (2005) [Fiction and Non-Fiction]