

# Rise of the Astro Blacks

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Afrofuturism? Ya needs to get with it *fast* babygirl. Because it's rapidly becoming The Default for your life. Best way we got now of talking about Yo Blackness *in total*. Same as was once the case with Black Cultural Nationalism and Black Arts Movement of the 1960s and 1970s and so very, very necessary. Because as the appearance and study of all things Black has grown more fragmented, self-alienated, niche, brand and market oriented, there is a strong need for a cultural catchall – a kind of Pan Afrikanist Dark Energy Race Matters Containment Field that can tie everything you love together for your personal and Black collectivist edification and edu-tainment. For today's hip, fluid, funky-freaky congregation of folk – We The People Flip Wilson once identified as “The Church of What's Happening Now” – Afrofuturism more than suits the present-day kulcha's need for a lil' illmatic Black Futurology with mucho contemporary currency.

Our personal notion of a Black Science Fiction has always preceded from the notion that you never had to travel far to experience it. Black Life is already science fiction-y enough, really. Just depends on what end of the telescope you happen to be peering through.

We can't right recollect at what point our tangential experience of Black Science Fiction coalesced into hard critical theory. Maybe it was the day Samuel Delany's interstellar space-opera NOVA arrived in the mail via The Science Fiction Book Club of America. Or those mornings we woke up to find H. Rap Brown, Eldridge Cleaver or Stokely Carmichael sleeping on our mama's living room couch in Dayton, Ohio. Or could it have been the lazy afternoon we first read Amiri Baraka's 1967 short story “Answers In Progress” about these aliens who invaded *the day after* a bloody and successful Black American revolution. Or the pre-dawn when we first encountered Abdul Mat Klarwein's high-mystical post-Mexican muralist album covers for Santana's *Abraxas* and Miles Davis' *Bitches Brew*?

It might also have been the night of our initiation into the cult of the Sun Ra Arkestra at Ed Murphy's Supper Club on Georgia Avenue near Howard University. That evening the band freely swung to *the breakadawn* and Ra himself ended the show by barreling through the audience yoking folk by their necks whilst commanding the assembled to "Give Me Your Death! You Don't Need It! Give Me Your Death". Perhaps another primal awakening occurred even earlier – way back in 1966, when Stan Lee and Jack Kirby introduced the Black Panther – militant emperor of a highly technological African nation called Wakanda into the mythology of Marvel's *Fantastic Four* comic book.

Somewhere back in there we also had the epiphany that all the great "White Science Fiction" stories were really runaway slave insurrection stories which meant they were all about our tribe The Church of What's happening Now too.

The Black Futurists we most revere – Nat Turner, Toussaint L'Ouverture, Martin Delany, Frederick Douglass, Harriet Tubman, W.E.B Du Bois, Ida B. Wells, Zora Neale Hurston, Langston Hughes, Jean Toomer, Marcus Garvey, Sun Ra, Elijah Muhammad, Martin Luther King, Malcolm X for starters – and their visionary chillun – Amiri Baraka, Henry Dumas, Samuel R. Delany, Jimi Hendrix, Lee 'Scratch' Perry, Octavia E. Butler, Grace Jones, George Clinton – were all cosmic renegades. Star hopping fugitives who pursued a Maroon kulcha dream logic in their lives and work. They all conceived of Black American rebelliousness, orneriness, contrariness and otherness as not just an emancipatory program but as a romantic and paradisiacal one – a means of not just escape-ism but of imaginary empire-of-the-senses-building – as primal motivations to creation an alternative reality wide enough and deep enough to contain an infinitude of prophetic body politics.

You should know, if you don't already, that the art movement that European art historians call Futurism was all about promoting fascism of the Nazi-ish kind in the 1930s and 1940s. The Euro-Futurists worshipped the power of modern industry to deliver mass-death at warp speeds. That's what their artsy-fartsy futurism anybody was dedicated. You should also know that the bright idea to mash an Afro atop Futurism was first done by a dude of European descent, a very clever and nimble young writer by the name of Mark Dery. It all went down in an essay he published in 1995 called *Black to The Future*. As far as we can tell that brisk collection of essays and interviews on the Cyberfunk phenomenon was the first time various Black expressive practices of a visionary nature got touted under this rubric. Samuel R. Delany, Tricia Rose and This Reporter were Dery's primary informants.

Here in the 21st century a young generation of African descended devotees, artists, poets, composers and academics have reclaimed the realm of the Afro-Futurist as not only a thing to study but a thing to be. A thing to hyperlink with as a spiritual and political home and an identity, even.

Back in the 1970s concepts wrought by Elijah Muhammad, Sun Ra, Ismael Reed, The Last Poets, Jimi Hendrix, and *Funkadelic* album cover artist Pedro Bell,

George Clinton got Blackfolk believing they came from the stars and then went about conducting lab experiments on human, animal and alien DNA under the pyramids. They also had us believing that once upon a time we could not only breathe and boogie under water but cure cancer with properly bent microtonal synthesizer squeals. Bad Brains, Fishbone, Jeff Mills, Afrika Bambaataa, Rakim, Rammellzee, Jean-Michel Basquiat, Underground Resistance, Derrick May, Drexciya, Goldie, Tricky, LTJ Bukem, Kool Keith, Living Colour, Public Enemy, OutKast and The Wu Tang Clan all picked up aspects of Clinton's millennial and militantly visionary legacy in the 1980s and 1990s. A general survey of the present reveals that Janelle Monáe and The Wondaland Arts Society crew are cognizant enough of our futurological histories to project themselves as avatars and conveyors of that tradition – the specific tradition of all the astronomical Black women who came before them: Billie Holiday, Tina Turner, Ri-Ri, Abby Lincoln Betty Carter, The Boss Miss Ross, June Tyson, Chaka Khan, Maxayn, Labelle, Nona Hendryx, The Brides of Funkenstein, Grace Jones, Janet Jackson and most relevantly from a genre perspective, the late Octavia E. Butler.

There is a trailblazing continuity to the younger Black women who are functioning as the major propagators of the Black science fiction tradition now – especially considering the contributions of Butler. Over the course of her thirty-five-year professional career as an SF author Butler firmly established that Black women, men and children's stories mattered in novels that spanned time, galaxies, post-apocalypses and hybridinated human-alien-vampire-mutant-ghoul bloodlines.

Besides begatting the *wildseed* known as Monáe, Butler also inspired the current explosion of literature, film and theatre by Black women speculative scribes, both here and abroad – notably Tananarive Due, N.K. Jemisin, Nalo Hopkinson, Andrea Hairston, Nnedi Okorafor and Sheree Thomas, editor of that most essential Black SF anthology *Dark Matter*. Also in the discussion are the many contemporary visionary Black women visual artists, filmmakers, performers and poets now on the Astro-Black scene: Cauleen Smith, Tracey Rose, kara lynch, Wangechi Mutu, Xaviera Simmons, Renée Cox, Iona Rozeal Brown, Wanuri Kahiu, Laylah Ali, Simone Leigh, Daphne Arthur, Mickalene Thomas, Eisa Davis, Tamar-kali, Imani Uzuri, Nandipha Mntambo, Leslie Hewitt, and the husband/wife collaborative known as Mendi + Keith Obadike.

Some good young brothers in the Black prophetic visual and novelistic tradition are in the mix too: Radcliffe Bailey, Sanford Biggers, Jeff Sonhouse, Charles 'Chuck Lightning' Joseph, Nate Wonder, Hank Willis Thomas, William Cordova, DJ Spooky, Arthur Jafa, Minister Faust, Colson Whitehead, Paul Beatty, Junot Díaz, to name a few. In fact, from where we sit on our starship's armchair bridge here on Sugar Hill Harlem, USA, the future has never looked darker or more energized by people of African *ascent*.

