Future[1]

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The word 'future' designates a time period or temporal space that is not now, but that is situated ahead of us and is distinctive from times that precede the one in which we are currently situated. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, future developed from the Old French (*futur*) during the late fourteenth century, when it denoted "a time after the present… yet to be". It derives from the Latin *futurus* via the stem *fu-* (to grow or become), which is the future participle of the word *esse* (to be).

Notions of the future – that which lies ahead – vary greatly. In traditional indigenous African spatiotemporal consciousness, time is experienced as a matter of *pacing* (akin to walking). Time begins when you arrive at your destination. African time also has a backwards linearity: when events occur, they immediately move backward to what John Mbiti (1990) calls "Zamani time" or *macro time*. All future events exist in *potential time* until experienced or actualized. These events do not depend on some specific clock time or calendar date; instead, time itself depends on the quality of the event and the person experiencing it. Once the future event is experienced, it instantaneously moves backward into the present and past dimensions. Those two dimensions bear the most ontological significance, "a person experiences time partly in his own individual life, and partly through the society which goes back many generations before his own birth" (ibid: 17).

In contrast, traditional European spatiotemporal consciousness conceives of time as flow and inevitability. Abstract conceptions of time as a continuous duration first emerged during the 14th century, within the European Judeo-Christian order (Postone 2003: 203). In this context, Biblical apocalyptic visions of the end are

1 This contribution has been previously published in *Keywords for Radicals: The Contested Vocabulary of Late Capitalist Struggle*, edited by Kelly Fritsch and Claire O'Connor (AK Press, 2016).

being inspired by strict regulation of work and prayer times. As Jeremy Rifkin notes in *Time Wars*, "western culture has institutionalized its images of the future by way of religion and politics, "making sure that "the future can be made predictable and controlled" (1987: 146-147). It is through religion and politics that a linear temporal orientation first came to be discerned, concurrent with the development of Western culture. The structure of time eventually came to be organized discretely and causally into a past, present, and future, with fixed events set against a forward moving timeline – one that would eventually come to a climactic, chaotic end. Prominent religious philosopher St. Augustine was among the first western thinkers to view Christian inspired, linear irreversible time as an important feature of his philosophy. In his book *Confessions,* written in Latin around AD 400, St. Augustine asks, "How can the past and future be, when the past no longer is, and the future is not yet? As for the present, if it were always present and never moved on to become the past, it would not be time, but eternity" (Pilkington 1876: 302).

This progressive unidirectional future was subsequently consolidated through significant events in science and technology. As Gerhard Dohrn-Van Rossum notes, "Only since the scientific revolution in the middle of the seventeenth century can one speak of experimentally qualifying scientific procedures and conceptions of time as a scaled continuum of discrete moments" (1996: 287). The increased use of public clocks (and eventually of personal watches and timepieces) further inscribed a mechanical order of time, impacting all aspects of Western life.

Developed around 1854, the second law of thermodynamics reinforced the linear notion that time was speeding into the future toward a chaotic end. Meanwhile, significant temporal-historical events like the invention of the telegram and the construction of the first long distance railroads allowed people to conceive of the future in terms of conquest. Considering the relationship between 'the future' and imperialism and colonialism, Stephen Kern notes how the "annexation of the space of others" and the "outward movement of people and goods" amounted to "spatial expressions of the active appropriation of the future" (2003: 92). In 1839, British Foreign Minister Lord Roseberry noted that the motivations for colonizing Africa were not about the present, "not what we want now, but what we shall want in the future" (Kern 2003: 92). Roseberry viewed the future as something to be mined; he and his fellow imperialists were engaged in the business of "pegging out claims for the future" as trustees "to the future of the race" (ibid: 92).

In the US context, both during and after slavery, *the future* offered a potential source of hope in the struggle against racial oppression. On July 5, 1852 in a speech called "The Meaning of July Fourth for the Negro" abolitionist and former slave Frederick Douglass attacked the hypocrisy of Independence Day, observing that, "America is false to the past, false to the present, and solemnly binds herself to be false to the future" (1852: 16). Consequently, America was liable to commit the same atrocities it had inflicted against those it had enslaved against humanity more

broadly. Decades later, in 1892, he told a group of black students at Atlanta University, "Be not discouraged. There is a future for you and a future for me" (Hamilton 2002: 117). Marcus Garvey, founder of the Universal Negro Improvement Association, ensured his followers that "we have a beautiful history, and we shall create another in the future that will astonish the world" (Garvey 2012: 6).

At the turn of the century, the avant-garde Italian social movement known as 'Futurism' attempted to revolutionize notions of the future in art, architecture, literature, and culture. Believing that the reverential cult of tradition should die, they created manifestos, artwork, music, and critical theory to capture a future that was rapidly speeding toward them. Much like Einstein's relativistic future, the Futurists' future had run into *now*. Or, as Filippo Marinetti wrote in his *Manifesto of Futurism*, "Time and Space died yesterday" (1909: n.p.). In the "Manifesto of Futurist Painters", Boccioni et al. declared that, "the triumphant progress of science makes profound changes in humanity inevitable" (1910: 24). In their view, such changes were "hacking an abyss between those docile slaves of past tradition and us free moderns, who are confident in the radiant splendor of our future" (ibid). They embraced a violent, clashing, chaotic, technological future – one that was constantly changing and perpetually at war with its own ideas. Because the future was transient, there could be no permanent buildings, monuments, or empires.

Notions of the future have virtually defined the modern day genre of science fiction. Following the Victorian era of wonder, space travel, and high technology, these future visions began to take on a dystopian tone. H. G. Wells spent much of his career time traveling into dystopian futures through fiction, essays, and speeches. Meanwhile, George Orwell's novel *1984* famously warned, "who controls the past controls the future; who controls the present controls the past" (1950: 37). The imaginations of science fiction writers have both been stimulated by and contributed to developments in science and technology. Indeed, many sci-fi writers are scientists, or are consulted by scientists when their work predicts the future or thinks up new possibilities and uses for technology.

One inevitable consequence of the rapidly changing future envisioned by the Italian Futurists and illustrated by science fiction is what Alvin Toffler called "Future Shock": the "shattering stress and disorientation that we induce in individuals by subjecting them to too much change in too short a time" (1970: 11). According to Toffler, the greatly accelerated rate of social and technological change in our society produced mostly negative personal and psychological consequences, which arose from "the superimposition of a new culture on an old one" and produced a form of culture shock from which the victim cannot recover (ibid: 11). This was what Marinetti and the Italian Futurists wished for: a 'future now', permanently split from the past, and brought about by a violent expansion of the scope of change. For Toffler, we were racing too far into the future, too quickly.

The term 'future shock' itself spread through popular culture, theory, and media after the release of Toffler's book. In 1973 Curtis Mayfield released his song, "Future Shock", on his album, *Back to the World* which Herbie Hancock covered as a title track in 1983: a jazz-funk-electronic fusion that was considered futuristic for its time. For Mayfield, future shock entailed a world of poverty, drug addiction, hunger, desperation:

> "When won't we understand
> This is our last and only chance
> Everybody, it's a future shock."

His words evoke a 'presentism time orientation' – the darker side of 'the future is now'. This represents how oppressed people today, particularly the descendants of enslaved Africans, embody temporal tensions, a disunity between cultural notions of time.[2]

Today this temporal orientation is connected to class, poverty, oppression, racism, and the legacy of slavery. Maintaining presentism over futurism has been both a defense mechanism against black communal trauma and post-trauma under the conditions of class warfare and racial oppression deriving from slavery, as well as a harkening back to a more natural, ancestral temporal-spatial consciousness. Michelle M. Wright cautions that "if we use the linear progress narrative to connect the African continent to Middle Passage Blacks today, we run into a logical problem, because our timeline moves through geography chronologically, with enslavement taking place at the beginning, or the past, and the march toward freedom moving through the ages toward the far right end of the line or arrow, which also represents the present" (2014: 57).

In a similar vein, Jeremy Rifkin explains the consequence of applying the linear progress narrative being to oppressed people keeps them "confined in a narrow temporal band, unable to anticipate and plan for their own future, are powerless to

2 Use of the "presentism time orientation" is class and race-based. It has been recently appropriated by New Age philosophy (being 'present' in meditation); however, when presentism is applied to Black people, it is often cited negatively, considered as lacking a sense of the future, and only concerned with present pleasures and immediate concerns. In studies on increased presence of heart disease in African Americans, for example, "presentism time orientation" is often cited as one of the causal factors. African Americans with a present-time orientation "may not see the need to take preventative medication or to finish antibiotics when symptoms disappear," or "may delay seeing a physician until symptoms are severe, and begin interfering with their work or life" (ELDER Project, Fairfield University School of Nursing 2014).

affect their political fate" (1987: 165). For those deprived of access to the future, they become stuck planning for the present while the society around them speeds forward in illusory, linear progress. The future thus becomes "untrustworthy [and] unpredictable" (ibid: 192). This narrow temporal band is used to penalize people on a daily basis: being 10 minutes late to court, for example, can mean losing your job, kids, home, or freedom. Hierarchies of time and lack of access to the future informs intergenerational poverty, in the same way that wealth passes down between generations in traditionally privileged families. In a famous speech given at the Founding Rally of the Organization of Afro-American Unity in 1964, Malcolm X addressed this imbalance by underscoring how "education is the passport to the future, for tomorrow belongs to those who prepare for it today" (1970, n.p.).

In *Future Shock*, Toffler identified change as "the process by which the future invades our lives." (1970: 3) Relying on similar conceptions, Barack Obama structured his entire 2008 presidential campaign around 'change', using it as a slogan to appropriate a specific vision of America's future. In 2009, he boldly told a joint session of Congress of his intentions in a speech: "we did not come to fear the future. We came here to shape it".[3] In a 2011 interview with ABC's George Stephanopoulos, President Obama was asked, "If hope and change define the 2008 campaign, what [two] words are going to define 2012?" to which he responded, "what'll define 2012 is our vision for the future".[4] His 2012 campaign slogan of 'Forward' appropriates the same visionary, future temporality.

How do we begin to map our return to our own futures? One way that radicals of today can more affirmatively claim or create the future is by actively engaging temporalities and adopting alternative temporal orientations and frameworks. This in turn shifts the meaning or placement of the future, and shifts the means of access to it. To quote Rifkin, "the new time rebels advocate a radically different approach to temporality" (1987: 12). In this spirit, the concept and community of Afrofuturism has emerged over the last twenty years as a tool, medium, and lens with which marginalized black communities across the diaspora might evaluate and shape our futures. According to Art curator and Afrofuturist, Detroit activist Ingrid LaFleur, Afrofuturism is "a way of imagining possible futures through a black cultural lens" (Womack 2013: 9). For D. Denenge Akpem, it is "an exploration and methodology of liberation, simultaneously both a location and a journey" (2011: n.p.). Along with Afrofuturism, a number of other alternative movements have emerged over the past few years (e.g., Chicano futurism, Queer futurism and Crip futurity) to appro-

3 Available online at https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-a-joint-session-congress-health-care. Last Access 27.08.2018.

4 See http://www.weeklystandard.com/blogs/obamas-three-word-vision-2012-our-vision-future_594999.html. Last Access 27.08.2018.

priate or redefine notions of *future* while actively exploring what the future might look like for marginalized people. For its part, Afrofuturism lends itself well to exploring pathways to liberation, unearthing our true histories, mapping our futures, and understanding our present conditions in the flow of time. Because it provides a perpetual bridge between the past, present, and future, Afrofuturism and the black speculative imagination can be used as liberation technologies to build future worlds.

See Also: History, Hope, Prefiguration, Utopia.

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We Travel the Space Ways

Black Imagination, Fragments, and Diffractions

[transcript]