



BOOK REVIEW:

*Literary Afrofuturism in the Twenty-First
Century*

David Callahan

Lavender, Isiah III, and Lisa Yaszek, editors. *Literary Afrofuturism in the Twenty-First Century*. Ohio State UP, 2020. ISBN 978-0814255964.

We are lucky to live in a time when an impressive fleet of creative works identified as Afrofuturist seems to have suddenly appeared as if warp-driven into scanning range. Responding to this activity, a growing amount of enthusiastic academic work has appeared, including several new key works by the editors of this volume. What then can this latest edited collection, which includes several important names in general SF studies, offer to complement what we have already, and could it be a starting point for someone new to the field?

The specific object of this book is signposted in its title: contemporary written manifestations of Afrofuturism. And it partly delivers on this promise, given that some contributors deal more with 20th-century examples than with 21st-century ones. Ultimately, whatever we have in the present is indebted to 20th-century works; these form part of the general continuum of what can seem like a recent phenomenon but is not, or at least not as much as it might first appear. Mark Bould's engrossing chapter on the struggle of mostly 20th-century writer John M. Faucette, for example, speaks to the work of recovery necessary before genealogies and histories can be sedimented, while Nedine Moonsamy's chapter on Amos Tutuola's *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* (1952) reimagines a pioneering work of postcolonial literature as also a "pioneering work of African science fiction" (216). Tutuola's definitely estranging prose and narrative, according to Moonsamy, evidence some of the conditions associated with SF,

and this becomes more evident when we factor in Afrofuturist revisitings of African mythologies.

After a crisp introduction by editors Isiah Lavender III and Lisa Yaszek, there is an invigorating roundtable discussion among several well-known and lesser-known creative writers: Nalo Hopkinson, N. K. Jemisin, Nisi Shawl, Bill Campbell, Chinelo Onwualu, Minister Faust, and Nick Wood. The fun of their discussion comes when they disagree on the significance of the term “Afrofuturism”, on whether their – or any work – can be considered Afrofuturist, and their outright rejection of the term in more than one case. After all, no label worth its salt gets away without being contested and denied by its supposed practitioners.

First out of the dock is Nalo Hopkinson, who wonders whether “Afrofuturist” is too specifically American to “contain or reflect those of us whose root context isn’t American” (25), which includes three of her fellow panellists. Kenyan-Canadian Minister Faust rejects the term peremptorily, preferring to think of himself as “Africentrist”. In the end, Hopkinson inclines towards generosity in acknowledging that a potentially confining term such as Afrofuturism can help to draw attention and to focus analysis, with which Nisi Shawl agrees, although Shawl comes down on the side of the vaguer “black speculative fiction community” (27). N. K. Jemisin notes that the term is sliding towards being simply SF and fantasy by black people, with skin colour becoming the prime determiner, as if it were a genre. Where once Samuel R. Delany and Octavia Butler would be put in the same question-and-answer sessions at conventions, now Jemisin and Nnedi Okorafor get reviewed together by non-specialist journalists, so clearly lessons have not been learnt, and sensitive attention to labels and characteristics remains necessary. Sensitive anything, however, is what has often been denied to black authors in ways that highlight the need for the heft that such labels can provide. Lisa Dowdall’s chapter on Jemisin’s *Broken Earth* trilogy begins by detailing the mindboggling racist attack on Jemisin for, well ... for being black and daring to dazzle on supposedly nonblack playgrounds. The ironies of such attacks from people who claim to represent the “essence” of SF are more ironic given Jemisin’s brilliant reworking of classic SF tropes in which historical and current categories of what counts as human are interrogated through the alchemy of creative world-making.

Minister Faust points out that much speculative writing by black writers is not set in the future at all, but the present and the past. Nisi Shawl offers AfroRetrofuturism as a link between some of this writing and steampunk, which has a potential that even Faust admits his own quixotic term of “Imhotep-hop” will never quite manage. The inclusion of white South African Nick Wood in the roundtable suggests how overdetermined the “Afro-” part of Afrofuturism can be in its identification with skin colour, an “Afroness” that Wood in no way abrogates to himself. Still, one sees the problem. And where do, say, black writers from Brazil fit in – to invoke just one sort of example that would have been good to see included here – or in the world of scholarship on Afrofuturism in general? It is well known that African-American cultural flows have served and continue to serve as galvanising models for resistance practices throughout the world, and not just in Africa. From African-origin citizens and immigrants from Europe to Polynesia, African-Americans have inspired and energised creative resistance to established hierarchies.

Sheree R. Thomas's good survey, "Dangerous Muses: Black Women Writers Creating at the Forefront of Afrofuturism", ranges backwards and forwards in time: now Zora Neale Hurston and Toni Morrison, now Andrea Hairston and Nnedi Okorafor. While many writers mentioned were published only in the 20th century, Thomas's overview reminds us that authors' careers cannot be expected to fall neatly into one century or another. De Witt Douglas Kilgore's "This Time for Africa! Afrofuturism as Alternate (American) History" addresses the popular genre of alternate history with the African diaspora at the centre, focusing on Steven Barnes's *Lion's Blood* (2002) and Terry Bisson's *Fire on the Mountain* (1988). Gina Wisker's chapter on Nalo Hopkinson's *The New Moon's Arms* (2007), partly a general synthesis of Hopkinson's work, refers to how some classic SF reruns colonial scripts, so that writing back against colonialist tropes is a key Afrofuturist move. As this has not sprung into existence without earlier progenitors, Wisker and Thomas touch on several of them. They include not just SF writers but others who drew on fantastic folk culture, magical realism, and other forms of popular culture.

Young-adult Afrofuturism is clearly one of the more visible manifestations of the examination of colonialist oppression and history, too, and in many cases we are speaking of crossover fictions enjoyed by adult readers as well. Rebecca Holden suggests that one thing that characterises Afrofuturist writing is that, however far in the future it is cast, it remains "connected to the 'dark truths' of the past of slavery and of the racism pervading the present and most likely the future" (91). In this it serves as a corrective to those narratives of the future in which racial distinctions have disappeared, but no explanation is given as to how we got there. Okorafor and Walter Mosley serve as more extended case studies for Holden. Elizabeth A. Wheeler's chapter using Sherri Smith's YA novel *Orleans* (2013) in the consideration of environmental disasters and crimes as not simply aimed at the environment but as centrally racist illustrates and complements Holden's chapter. Later, Jerome Winter's chapter on environmentalist works, mostly by Sofia Samatar, Jemisin, and Okorafor, further develops the observation that while environmentalist fiction by nonblack authors typically critiques big business, politicians, scientists, or simply "human" blindness to the consequences of capitalism and technological innovation, Afrofuturist authors have a greater awareness of how environmental disaster is linked to instrumentalist colonial attitudes towards peoples *and* the land.

Gerry Canavan's chapter on the African land from which T'Challa (Black Panther) comes – Wakanda – offers a snapshot of the changing circumstances in which black people might become the central agents of heroic stories. Canavan's exposition, however, also reveals the many ways in which references to Wakanda and T'Challa reproduce colonialist tropes about Africa even as they establish an African figure as a powerful and worthy protagonist. In a key observation, the comics are thus both contemporary critiques of American power and self-assumed global centrality but also, given Marvel's lack of commitment to such critique as its final word on America, "always threatening ... to collapse into racism again" (Canavan 183). Such entrenched racism is evoked by the playful title of novelist Deji Bryce Olukotun's *Nigerians in Space* (2014), encapsulating the unexamined prescriptions in which high-achieving black Africans in space are seen as more unimaginable than any number of aliens or alternative futures. In Marleen S. Barr's reading of Olukotun, this

failure of imagination relates less to the sidelining of Nigeria as a source of space travellers than to Olukotun's sidelining of national space(s) in favour of mobility, both spatial- and identity-related.

Notwithstanding the scepticism evident in the roundtable about the term "Afrofuturism", in the coda Lavender and Yaszek reveal that they continue to believe in the "utility of Afrofuturism as a critical term" (231). This is what we expect of markers. They energise us, beckon to us, and lead us to things we might not have noticed. "Afrofuturism" is doing a great job, it seems to me, and this book, of interest to the commander and the cadet, should be added to the fleet immediately.

Biography: David Callahan, Associate Professor at the University of Aveiro, works mainly in the areas of postcolonial studies. His most recent publication is the co-edited *Body and Text: Cultural Transformations in New Media Environments* (2019).