

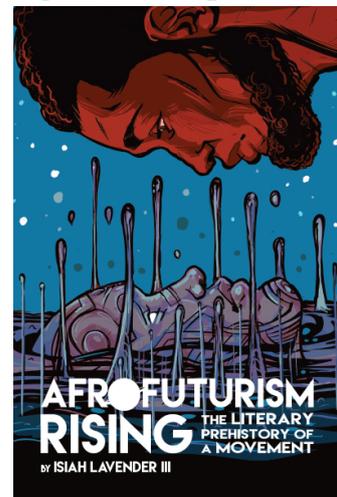


BOOK REVIEW:
*Afrofuturism Rising: The Literary
Prehistory of a Movement*

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Lavender, Isiah, III. *Afrofuturism Rising: The Literary Prehistory of a Movement*. Ohio State UP, 2019. ISBN 978-0814255568.

In the case of Isiah Lavender's *Afrofuturism Rising*, one is tempted to "judge a book by its cover" because the cover art serves as such a stimulating visual precursor of its content: it depicts a funereal encounter where a departed Black man's face, wrapped in a vortex of water, is stretching to meet the face of a contemporary Black man, who maintains the gaze of the departed. This cover beckons the reader into Lavender's theme of voyage into the dark past of Black people, into deciphering the prehistory of Afrofuturism. In his introductory chapter, "On Defining Afrofuturism", Lavender acknowledges that despite the lack of consensus surrounding Afrofuturism's definition amongst its scholars and writers, it is regarded as a moment and movement. The genre's futuristic stories are all seasoned by the salt of otherness, wherein the respective authors explore the "optimisms and anxieties framing the future imaginings of black people" (2). Challenging prior work by Mark Dery, who coined "Afrofuturism" in 1993, Lavender argues that a lack of tangible technoculture – the utilization of scientific and technological devices in human interactions – does not prevent a text from being Afrofuturistic since Black lives themselves mirror the estrangement in SF texts (9). Indeed, Lavender's book provides a substantial contribution to the field in ensuring that techno-



culturally deprived, canonical texts are included within the field of Afrofuturism. As such, Lavender proposes to explore the prolepsis of Afrofuturism, which has a “literary pedigree that is much longer than Dery acknowledges”; Lavender accomplishes this by interpreting texts from the 18th through 20th centuries that highlight the African-American experience of slavery (108). In doing so, Lavender claims that typically non-Afrofuturist texts, like Henry Bibb’s autobiography (1848), are indeed Afrofuturistic: they include “science-fictional language” and “hope impulses”. However, as enticing as that seems, by incorporating these canonical texts into the field, Lavender also risks identifying *all* speculative fiction that highlights Black experience in America as Afrofuturism. This leads to the crux of the issue – can everything be Afrofuturistic?

In terms of style, Lavender continually coins new metaphors in order to motivate his central conceptual analogy, which is that race is a labour-based technology. Black bodies thus function as “living circuits” whose metaphorical circuitry is developed through a “black networked consciousness” that stimulates communication among their kinfolk via inherited traditional customs and generational trauma. When linked to the “black networked consciousness”, Lavender argues that each “living circuit” (that is, Black bodies) transmits “charges” of “hope impulses” into a “tranhistoric feedback loop” through which readers can navigate the historical grievances of White America (7). When this current is connected, the “living circuits” – again, Lavender is talking about Black bodies – simultaneously upload their nonfictional violent experiences with racial oppression into the “hyper violence loop”. This loop confirms the normalization and mythologization of endless violence on black bodies, regardless of the breakthroughs of Civil Rights and Black Lives Matter Movements (11). In other words, the inherited legacy of Black slaves allows modern-day Black Americans to acknowledge that the injustices they endure are rooted in the nation’s abhorrently monstrous past. However, in asserting that Afrofuturism’s foundations long predate Dery’s 1993 neologism, Lavender maintains that the “Literary Prehistory of a Movement” remains fundamentally located within African-American experience – a rhetorical move that sits uneasily, for example, with Lavender’s inclusion of Olaudah Equiano’s autobiography (1789) and Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* (1958). In other words, Lavender risks subsuming all Black diasporic experience into a single monolithic model.

In Chapter one, “Hope and Freedom Technologies”, Lavender begins by theorizing hope and freedom as technologies that stimulate the movement, and he supports his metaphor by reading Benjamin Banneker, Olaudah Equiano, and Phillis Wheatley as “Colonial Afrofuturists”. The scholarship of Vincent Carretta contends that Equiano was born in South Carolina, causing him to be African American (Carretta 2). This leads to the observation that Lavender does not explicitly identify the criteria with which the forementioned are classified as “Colonial Afrofuturists”, though one might infer that their eligibility is based on their time of publication. If such is the case, would Ukawsaw Gronniosaw, the first African slave to publish in Britain (1772), not be considered a “Colonial Afrofuturist”? Also, can characters such as Caliban from Aimé Césaire’s *A Tempest* (1969) or Ti Noel from Alejo Carpentier’s *The Kingdom of this World* (1957) be considered “Colonial Afrofuturist”? Since these texts are located within the Caribbean where the New and Old Worlds collided, their omission is

perplexing and suggests how scholars of Caribbean literature could usefully build on and broaden Lavender's work in the future. Additionally, Lavender argues that literacy and spiritual technologies were pivotal to initiating the hope impulse that implanted the seed of resistance in authors such as Frederick Douglass, Phillis Wheatley, Olaudah Equiano, and Benjamin Banneker. While literacy technology seems more concrete and plausible, spiritual technologies require belief in fantastical and/or folkloric tales that (mystically) assure a better future without scientific explanation. However, the way that Lavender speaks about spiritual technologies might be considered potentially problematic – an implicit double standard, perhaps, that favours Christianity over traditional African religions by identifying the latter as “supernatural” and “magical”, though the same can potentially be said of the former. Lavender claims Phillis Wheatley's *On Being Brought from Africa to America* (1773) is Afrofuturistic because of its well-known embedded anagram and “double meanings” (40). However, this seems more of an attempt to redeem Wheatley because her poem's controversial nature, particularly for Black audiences.

In the second chapter, “Black Uprisings and the Fight for the Future”, Lavender contradicts the illusion of slave submission by tracing the influence and impact of slave rebellions, revolutions, and thwarted conspiracies of “Black Radicals”, both renowned – Toussaint L'Overture (1791), Jean-Jacques Dessalines (1791), David Walker (1829), Nat Turner (1831) – and omitted, such as Gabriel Prosser (1800) and Denmark Vesey (1822). In his third chapter, “Of Alien Abductions, Pocket Universes, Trickster Technologies, and Slave Narratives”, Lavender claims that hope impulses inspired former slaves to make use of pocket universes, trickster technologies, and skin technologies to transport and camouflage their bodies safely to freedom. It seems strange that Harriet Tubman was not given a prominent role in the subject of pocket universes based on her role in the Underground Railroad. He instead makes references to Henry Bibb (1837), William W. Brown (1853), and Ellen and William Craft (1848), all of whom utilised these technologies to escape enslavement, but who tend to be neglected and overlooked in Afrofuturism.

In Chapter Four, “Black Bodies in Space: Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*”, Lavender relates that the novel is a “classic” Afrofuturist text because its “hope impulses” are an essential feature of Afrofuturism. Lavender coins terms such as “vernacular technology”, “literalized metaphors”, and “alternate worlds” to contextualise his argument that *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) is Afrofuturistic. The characters are committed to obtaining their own version of an American Dream by utilizing folklore to preserve their inherited traditions after being marginalised by colonialists. However, being that the text only becomes Afrofuturistic after the introduction of Lavender's terms, this implies that without Lavender's terminology, *Their Eyes* would not properly belong to the canon of Afrofuturism. It seems that Lavender's attempt to reaffirm the prestige and validity of the movement incites queries; since any fictional account can be regarded as speculative, there must be a demarcation of some kind that determines if a text is Afrofuturist. Without this, everything will be Afrofuturist, thereby equating the “movement” and “moment” into a mere genre – SF and fantasy written by black Americans.

In Chapter Five, “‘Metallically Black’: Bigger Thomas and the Black Apocalyptic Vision of Richard Wright's *Native Son*”, Lavender reflects on the

dangers that occur when African Americans are unable to access the trans-historic feedback loop and instead connect to the hyperreal violence loop. Bigger Thomas is unable to connect with the appropriate loop because he “literally cannot see hope” (141). Because of this, Bigger “shape-shifts” into a “primitive Negro” with the “metallically black” skin of a “devalued nonhuman” (148). As a “primitive negro”, Bigger is a failed mechanical experiment of sorts since he is unable to be reconfigured into a cyborg and function within society – as a driver for a wealthy family – so he reverts to his “natural form”. By denying Black men an opportunity to have hope, systemic racism serves as a laboratory where their “metallically black skin” is continuously subjected to forms of reconfiguring, despite the known dangers and results of such experiments. Wright’s novel manifests the result and dangers of Black men being stigmatised, segregated, and systemically oppressed. It is rather unfortunate that Bigger “cannot hope to survive against the burden of this nonhuman image”, and as a result, he – like many Black men – accept their fatalism (151). Lavender’s analysis of the “science-fictional language” utilised by Wright, as well as his terminology, is provocative as well as effective. In general, though, although the extreme broadness of Lavender’s definition of “Afrofuturism” might raise a few eyebrows, *Afrofuturism Rising* is sure to positively influence the conversation about the movement for a long time to come.

Biography: Reba K. Dickson (dickson.re@northeastern.edu) is a recent graduate of Florida Atlantic University’s Masters in English program and a PhD student at Northeastern University. Her research explores the “monster” figure associated with individuals of Black lineage and their altruicide in Caribbean, American, and African literature.

Works Cited

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