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Time-Sensitive: Teaching Afrofuturism Through the Nineteenth Century

by Dalia Davoudi

ARTWORK BY LUZ VALERIA CHAVEZ (REPRINTED WITH PERMISSION)

"Imagination makes temporality possible."

- Kara Keeling, *Queer Times, Black Futures* (2019)

I n May of 2021, when news outlets were reporting that the University of North Carolina had declined Nikole Hannah-Jones's application for tenure, I was putting the finishing touches on the syllabus for a literature course called "Afrofuturism and Its Histories," which was designed to contextualize contemporary Afrofuturist aesthetics within a wide set of Black American literary, political, and philosophical traditions. Part of my mission as a teacher who specializes in nineteenth-century American literature is to combat what I see as a pervasive political presentism and bridge the gap between early American and contemporary histories, whether it's in the context of feminist politics, queer expression, or Black legacies of uprising and political resistance. Efforts like Hannah-Jones's *1619 Project*, with its famous re-examination of the legacy of American slavery, have produced a cultural episteme in which history is understood as a living thing, subject to remediation. At the same time, speculative fiction has become an important genre with which artists return to forgotten or repressed American histories, as in HBO's *Watchmen*'s exploration of the Tulsa massacre of 1921, or *Lovecraft Country*'s horrors, which are, for instance, set against Emmett Till's memorial in one unforgettable episode. And it's not just Black (science) fiction that features this kind of imaginative approach to history: an article in *Wired* published in November of 2020 catalogues the "extraordinary number of recent novels, films, and shows [that] center on a hero who has to go to the past to save the future, usually from utter destruction," highlighting the ways that these texts reconsider present-day political phenomena (including the rise of Trumpism) through the lens of fascist histories.

Teaching into this cultural momentum allows students to see the many ways that Black histories can be told and retold and to recognize the ways that various American histories are continuous with contemporary American concerns; we are in a unique historical moment in which college students are primed to think about history in complicated, layered, and non-linear ways—and the ongoing controversy around figures like Hannah-Jones is a reminder that these new historiographies pose overt threats to structures of power. I argue that teaching radically requires us to reframe the notion of history itself for our students by refusing the sense that history is a story we are witnessing from our position at its end. In designing "Afrofuturism and Its Histories," I attempted to "lose the plot" (to use Tavia Nyong'o's phrase) by refusing a linear or progressive historical narrative and showing my students that they are not just subject to but also participants in the ongoing creation of history and the future.

Devoting a full semester to teaching Afrofuturism is its own historiographical argument: the existence of the course itself proposes that what can be perceived as an aesthetic "of the moment" is in fact worth studying through a wide historical lens. I designed this class as a part-time lecturer at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, where I taught literature, film, and composition. As in many of my classes for non-majors, the concept for the course began with what I imagined to be a familiar, contemporary cultural object that would give students an anchor to explore a broader set of historical and theoretical concerns. Afrofuturism as an aesthetic is culturally diffuse and familiar in 2021, and *Black Panther* – which, as I predicted, almost all of my students had seen prior to the start of our course—is only the most famous of its instantiations. Even if students haven't read N.K. Jemisin novels, they have undoubtedly encountered techno-cultural tropes in Janelle Monáe's *The ArchAndroid* (2010) and *Dirty Computer* (2018), while interplanetary aesthetics and Egyptological iconography show up in music videos by Rihanna, SZA, and Solange. My students are also surrounded by Chicago's living Afrofuturist legacies, with artists like Angel Bat Dawid; the faculty features artists like Nick Cave, who is famous for his otherworldly *Soundsuits* and is the director of the school's fashion program, and D. Denenge Duyst-Akpem, an Afrofuturist performance and installation artist, who teaches multi-disciplinary Afrofuturism courses to our undergraduates. But while my students had a sense of Afrofuturism in the here and now, I wanted them to see that the wave of new Afrofuturist creative production is an instance of what Tavia Nyong'o describes as "the persistent reappearance of that which was never meant to appear, but was instead meant to be kept outside or below representation" (3). Teaching this way challenges the widespread assumption among students that pop-cultural forms are trivial or self-explanatory—a particularly pervasive attitude at art schools. (In fact, the glossing of Afrofuturism as a mass-cultural phenomenon is linked to the ways that Americans have become habituated toward and often inured to expressions of Black pain. I will never forget the experience of watching Moor Mother perform her scalding, raw, spoken-word poetry and music during sunset at Brooklyn Bridge Park while park-goers barely spared a curious glance; one runner simply pulled out his phone to film without breaking his stride.) My goal in teaching a long history of Afrofuturism was to suggest that the kinds of aesthetics we see in contemporary Afrofuturist literature, television, and film have a compelling and important tradition in Black American literary history, and also to show that it has deep roots in Black political history.

I taught two versions of this course. I initially designed it to move slowly back from twenty-first century examples of Afrofuturism, which is essentially how I taught a longer sixteen-week version of the course, looping back to the twenty-first century in the last two weeks of the semester. But the majority of this essay reflects on the more condensed six-week version during which I experimented with a more conceptually organized approach to the material that would emphasize continuities between the nineteenth and twenty-first centuries. This historiographically experimental version of the course borrowed from the logic of Afrofuturism itself. Afrofuturism is many things—a literary genre, a cultural aesthetic, a political sensibility—but it's also a philosophy of history that offers non-linear, non-teleological models for thinking about the past, present, and future. This essay reports on the experiment of teaching Afrofuturism in a non-linear, non-progressive way.

In the following pages, I outline five sets of textual and theoretical clusters that represent five weeks of the summer course, and draw from student work, reflecting on the ways that student demographics played a role in classroom discussions. I hope to offer other teachers of contemporary Black literature, film, and music a set of nineteenth-century American Black writers, speakers, and activists that can be incorporated into syllabi to deepen students' understanding of legacies of Black activism and speculative thought, and a set of conceptual nodes with which to ground the works theoretically. But as much as this essay explores a pedagogical and historiographical approach, it's impossible to detach the object of the course from its conditions and context, which finally defined— and in some ways mirrored— its content. Of course, the most salient backdrops to our discussions were the massive BLM protests that were coincidental with the pressures of COVID. During both semesters of teaching "Afrofuturism and Its Histories," most of my students were students of color and represented many different relationships to the topics of the course (among them Afrofuturism, science fiction, Black political activism, radicalism). As always, teaching is time-sensitive—it is necessarily shaped by shifting historical conditions and interrupted by events of all kinds. At least half of my thirteen students in this summer section were there because they had to take a leave of absence or drop the course mid-semester (mostly because of COVID-related issues). Everyone was exhausted. Sometimes this was quite literal, because exactly half of them were taking the course from another continent— that's simply where they had to be during this wave of COVID— which meant that we were all on a different clock. Some of my students were in countries that were still suffering spikes in COVID deaths while many people based in the U.S. began to return to business as usual. In the following, then, I report on this course as an event.

There are two major historical nodes that cover canonical Afrofuturism: the 1960s/70s and the 2010s. The first cluster wasn't named as such until Mark Dery's influential essay was published in the '90s, but it clearly features Sun Ra, Samuel Delany, George Clinton, and Octavia Butler as the musical and literary creators of the Black science-fictional, inter-planetary thinkers of the '60s, '70s, and '80s. The current node of Afrofuturist cultural production has gone much more mainstream than the last, at least in its form as a cultural aesthetic (though, as I've argued, its philosophy of history has also made its way into the public imagination), but both have prominent positions in literary and musical Black cultural histories.

However, the conversation around Black science fiction has changed considerably in the past two decades, becoming more expansive in its historical, generic, theoretical, and formal purviews. Black science-fiction anthologies like Sheree R. Thomas's *Dark Matter* (2000) have moved to extend the canon back, perhaps most influentially with the inclusion of W.E.B. DuBois's "The Comet" (1920). Scholars increasingly cite turn-of-the-century texts like Charles Chesnutt's "The Goophered Grapevine" (1899) and Pauline Hopkins's *Of One Blood* (1902) as literary precursors to the speculative philosophies of Afrofuturist texts. Alex Zamalin's *Black Utopia* (2019)— a

recent study of Black nationalist politics and utopian expressions as they appear in American speculative literature of the last two hundred years—opens with Martin Delany, a Black emigrationist born in 1812. Literary scholars now consider Delany's *Blake: or, the Huts of America* (1859)—a novel about transnational slave insurrection and a retelling of Pan-American history—to be a nineteenth-century iteration of the kind of fabulated histories and speculative futurity that defines more contemporary Black science fiction and specifically Afrofuturism. In my own work, I make a case for William Wells Brown's *Clotel: or, The President's Daughter* (1853) as a key novel in this nineteenth-century tradition: though the novel is not overtly science fictional—rather, it fits with a tradition of revisional, and alternate histories (most centrally, reexamining the legacy of Thomas Jefferson's relationship with Sally Hemings)—it imagines and performs a Black futurity, theorizing invention and speculation as strategies for attaining large-scale liberation. All of this effort to reframe the work of Black science fiction is compounded by theoretical and methodological innovations of scholars like Jayna Brown, Kara Keeling, Tavia N'yongo, C. Riley Snorton, Ruha Benjamin, and Zakiyyah Iman Jackson, who—invoking queer and posthuman notions of change, futurity, and utopia—compose alternative timelines and temporalities for thinking about Black history. All of these thinkers were central to my conceptualization of this course, and several of them were assigned as secondary sources.

So, the course: In an effort to span a wide Black history of speculative philosophy, politics, and aesthetics, I initially came up with this description:

> In this course, we will hone key literary-analytical strategies and begin cultivating more advanced independent research skills as we study the history of Afrofuturist aesthetics. The term "Afrofuturism," coined in the 1990s, describes a literary, musical, and visual aesthetic that draws on futuristic tropes to explore visions of utopia, alienation, and Black history. Afrofuturism is now widely recognized as a genre: though developed by literary and musical figures in the 1960s, contemporary films like Black Panther and artists like Solange and FKA Twigs reach popular audiences. In this course we will study foundational Afrofuturist works from the 1960s to the present, but we will also hit rewind, studying lesser-known invocations of planetary time, speculative futures, and alternative worlds by Black writers of the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. In doing so, we will explore the ways that planetary aesthetics in turn literalize social alienation, explore notions of belonging and possibility, and articulate a revolutionary inevitability. Among the artists we will encounter are Sun Ra, Lizzie Borden, Samuel Delany, Octavia Butler, Monique Walton, Frances Harper, Charles Chesnutt, Pauline Hopkins, and W.E.B. DuBois; our goal will be to trace a history of Afrofuturist thought across different forms of cultural production. As this is a writing-intensive course, students should expect to write essays, give presentations, and complete homework in which you practice analytical strategies; assignments will be geared towards developing strong organization,

clarity, and voice in your writing. The final unit of the course will center on developing your research skills.

In the first draft of my syllabus for "Afrofuturism and Its Histories," then, the plan was to begin with the most contemporary pieces of Afrofuturism and then slowly move back into the nineteenth century. This would establish the roots of Afrofuturism as a literary or generic tradition, and also as a political one, and it fulfilled my abiding desire to bridge the cultural work of Black Lives Matter with Black abolitionist movements of the nineteenth century. But as I planned the six-week summer course, it increasingly seemed to me that a more thematic structure would serve the condensed, faster pace of the course, and also allow us to unravel the various philosophical ideas that underpinned Afrofuturist aesthetics.

My revision of the syllabus was inspired by Nyong'o's invitation to "lose the plot" as a trans-disciplinary method. In *Afro-Fabulations: The Queer Drama of Black Life* (2019), Nyong'o explains that:

> The model of collective memory I employ is one in which recollection gathers up the past with its present in disjunctive synthesis. By "disjunctive," I mean the fabulative process by which every act of recollection branches off in all directions, foiling any effort to cohere the narrative of the past into a single, stable, and linear history. I will be interested in showing how, in the process of recollecting the story of the past, we repeatedly lose the plot. (99)

When we lose the plot in telling Black histories, Nyong'o argues, we are able to see Black life as tense-less, always, and multiple. In 2021, losing the plot was a way for me to imagine teaching in a way that didn't only historicize Afrofuturism so that it seemed to appear and reappear throughout the last centuries, but to produce a sense of intimacy and ongoing relation *between* historical periods. That is, in a moment where alienation and pessimism abound, showing a trans-historical or cross-historical solidarity would highlight the work of radical politics as an endlessly possible one, always reappearing.

I decided to design the syllabus around philosophical and political clusters found in Afrofuturist texts, working anachronistically or, to use Nyong'o's preferred term, anarchaeologically. I took it as an opportunity to unite the course's content with its form and to create a truly Afrofuturist course—to the extent that I could as a non-Black, Iranian scholar—rather than a course *about* Afrofuturism. There was, of course, a necessity for limits and structure. For one thing, the fact that this was a writing-intensive course meant that we were balancing readings and lectures with writing instruction; this was not an upper-level literature course. Because of my training as an Americanist, the syllabus centered on texts produced in the United States (though the concept of national borders would come apart as we read). In the final form of the syllabus, the readings and lectures followed five major clusters: the planetary/Black nationalism; Black cosmopolitanism; queer posthumanism; race and technology/race as technology; and music and mysticism. (I've italicized the texts that echoed from previous clusters.)

1. **The planetary/Black nationalism**: *Black Panther* (2018), *Space is the Place* (1972), Martin Delany (1852)

2. **Black cosmopolitanism**: Samuel Delany (1967), Grace Jones (1982-6), William Wells Brown (1852)

3. **Queer posthumanism**: *Samuel Delany (1967)*, Octavia Butler (1984), Lizzie Borden (1983), Janelle Monáe (2010)

4. **Race and technology/Race as technology**: *Lizzie Borden (1983)*, Pauline Hopkins (1902), DJ Spooky (2004), *Janelle Monáe (2010)*

5. **Music and mysticism/spirituality**: *Space is the Place (1972),* Alice Coltrane (1971), Erykah Badu (2000), Sojourner Truth (1843), Janaya "Future" Khan (2021)

In addition to privileging conceptual issues, this new telos allowed me to quickly move through masculinist Afrofuturism that centers figures like Sun Ra and instead focus on the rich feminist and queer histories embedded in Afrofuturism's history. Still, we began with some familiar figures. Before moving to reflect on the experience of actually teaching with this methodology, I'll talk through Unit 1 on planetary aesthetics and Black nationalism. I started there because I suspected that even without knowing much about Afrofuturism as a genre, my students would recognize *Black Panther* as a seminal moment in contemporary Hollywood history, and because I hoped to offer this as an immediate example—and also quickly challenge the film as a not-especially radical version of Afrofuturist politics. (I screened a few clips from the film on the first day of class. As I anticipated, my students had a lot of criticisms to offer, suggesting in turn that it was reductive, colonialist, and even frustratingly invested in respectability.) Sun Ra's *Space is the Place* (dir. John Coney) would help us understand *Black Panther*'s investment in *place*, about the desire for a Black utopia, and about the relevance of science fiction as a tool for speculative hope. These two texts offer a fairly straightforward—if also somewhat fundamentally oppositional—way to think about Afrofuturism as a political and cultural aesthetic. As students encountered these foundational films, they also read secondary texts that aimed to define Afrofuturism.

On the third day of class, we triangulated the cluster with a nineteenth-century piece by Martin Delany entitled "Political Destiny of the Colored Race on the American Continent." Delany, born in Virginia in 1812, was a vocal, prolific abolitionist and a staunch Black nationalist. Although he explored various possibilities for a Black state, he pushed for a settlement in Liberia during the antebellum period. His "Political Destiny" speech, delivered in 1854 at the National Emigration Convention of Colored People in Cleveland, Ohio, makes an impassioned case for Black emigration as the only solution to the problem of slavery. I had my students take turns reading long sections of the manifesto out loud. Three passages drove our conversation:

No people can be free who themselves do not constitute an essential part of the ruling element of the country in which they live… The liberty of no man is secure, who controls not his own political destiny… A people, to be free, must necessarily be *their own rulers*… (247)

Our friends in this and other countries, anxious for our elevation, have for years been erroneously urging us to lose our identity as a distinct race, declaring that we were the same as other people; while at the very same time their own representative was traversing the world and propagating the doctrine in favor of *a universal Anglo-Saxon predominance*…The truth is, we are not identical with the Anglo-Saxon or any other race of the Caucasian or pure white type of the human family, and the sooner we know and acknowledge this truth, the better for ourselves and posterity…We have then inherent traits, attributes—so to speak—and native characteristics, peculiar to our race—whether pure or mixed blood—and all that is required of us is to cultivate these and develop them in their purity, to make them desirable and emulated by the rest of the world. (252)

Should we encounter an enemy with artillery, a prayer will not stay the cannon shot; neither will the kind words nor smiles of philanthropy shield his spear from piercing us through the heart. We must meet mankind, then, as they meet us—prepared for the worst, though we may hope for the best. Our submission does not gain for us an increase of friends nor respectability—as the white race will only respect those who oppose their usurpation, and acknowledge as equals those who will not submit to their rule. (253)

Americanist scholars often compare Delany to figures like Frederick Douglass, but Douglass is granted far more orthodoxy by contemporary mainstream narratives about nineteenth-century Black abolitionism, while Martin Delany is notably absent from most accounts of Black political leadership of the period. This is undoubtedly because of their differing relationship to whiteness: Where Douglass, with the goal of social integration, was more willing to make the case for a Black American citizenship to slaveowners, separatist Delany rejected the impulse to make any pleas to whites, insisting that Black abolitionists in the United States should recognize their global history and embrace Pan-African solidarity.

Delany's Black nationalism, his embrace of Pan-Africanism, and his rejection of assimilationism as they appear in "The Political Destiny of Colored People on the American Continent" all resonate philosophically and politically with the cultural work of texts like *Space is the Place* and *Black Panther*. But Delany also helped us reframe our conversations about respectability versus radicalism: I used this third day to highlight how Delany's rejection of sentimental political pleas echoed Sun Ra's conflicts with the Black Panther Party in the 1970s (Sun Ra saw the Black Panthers as overly invested in American Blackness), and we were able to return to the more contemporary *Black Panther* film and rethink its relationship to respectability. Reframing *Black Panther* in these multiple contexts, however, makes it difficult to place it as *either* radical in its case for Black nationalism or as a reductive, pop-y cultural text overly invested in being generically palatable. Putting these three thinkers in conversation with one-another opened up the relationship between radicalism and assimilationism as a non-binary one. It helped us lose the plot—at least for a moment—and linger in the multidimensional political valences and potentialities of Afrofuturism. As I'll narrate in a moment, I ended this unit/week by pointing to Black feminist critiques of the masculinist nationalism of figures like Sun Ra and Delany, which set the agenda for the rest of this semester: to explore feminist and queer visions of utopia, community, and liberation.

Like unit 1, each of the other four clusters were similarly designed to produce a set of questions that built on the previous collection of readings and incorporated different kinds of media—among them films, music, short stories, speeches, Instagram videos. My hope was that as we routed and rerouted throughout the semester, my students would be able to see that there is no way to reduce or commodify Afrofuturism into the logic of a "trend"; it had too many relationships to too many artistic traditions, political formations, and canons.

Although the bulk of major assignments for this course involved formal analytical writing (including comparative analysis, close reading, and research papers), our smaller weekly assignments and in-class prompts were aimed to have students process the significance of our studies. To draw from an example from our first unit: when we read Martin Delany's speech near the end of our first week, I proposed a thought experiment in the spirit of Afrofuturist speculation. As we began to unpack the social implications of an emigrationist political view, I asked my students to freewrite a carefully considered response to the following prompt, highlighting that students would *not* be required to share their responses with me or the class:

Take a moment to consider an element of your identity that is marginalized or invisible in our society—it could be (an intersection in) your race, ethnicity, gender identity, sexuality, religion, or disability—and think about what would happen if someone created an entire nation-state based on that identity. How do you think such a society would function? Would you be interested in moving to a place like this? What would be the upside, and what would be the downside? Does it sound like a utopia to you?

I gave them ten minutes to write and think and then asked if anyone wanted to share their reflections. One student cracked a joke about her crew of queer friends, and the class laughed (silently, on mute, because COVID meant we couldn't even laugh together properly). A more earnest student raised their hand to describe their image of a trans and nonbinary utopia, and we spent some time exploring the ways that a society without fixed or binary gender would function: would people be liberated from oppressive social expectations or would this society develop a different way to assign normative roles? Do societies have to be hierarchical? Do societies inevitably develop biologically reductive or arbitrarily assigned roles to function well? (I confessed that I thought that yes, under capitalism, divisions of labor would always be enforced through some kind of biologism—but then also summarized the Shulamith Firestone pitch for

them just in case.) I asked: How might racial formations change in a trans or nonbinary nation? (We were not quite ready to answer that question in unit 1.) A final student raised his hand to say that the idea of Black emigration didn't appeal to him in the least—that no nation founded on identity politics would suit him—and that those societies would just create a different set of ways to discriminate against one another. We slowed down here, exploring potential problems (would colorism persist?)

This was the same student who, on the first day of class, argued that *Black Panther*'s vision for the future was inherently colonialist, so I used this moment as an opportunity to summarize a feminist critique of figures like Sun Ra and Delany as representative of a kind of masculinist futurism, which is precisely, as Jayna Brown writes, that it reproduces settler colonial logic and "fused to the sovereignty of the male individual landowner" (27). We would close the semester with a week on Black feminist futurist activism, which began with Brown's chapter on "Black Women Mystics and Utopias of the Ecstatic" on Sojourner Truth's "provisional utopian enclaves" (Brown 11) and ended with that week's "Sunday sermon" from Janaya "Future" Khan, a nonbinary activist and co-founder of BLM-Toronto who hosts weekly "sermons" on Instagram live to unpack current issues for her followers. I gestured to this for my students, but also returned to my students themselves, looping us back to the first commentator's joke about her queer friends and asking what it would be like to see utopia as a practice of community building. What did community look like for them? What would it mean to think about utopia as an everyday practice, rather than a place?

Exercises like this, which ask students to bring their own identities and orientations into the classroom, always require time to talk through carefully. These tend to work well at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, where students possess the skill to speak directly to everyone in the room (including their instructors), likely because of the students' habituation to critique of one another's work in the context of art schools. But although different student bodies require different kinds of framing for such prompts, they are typically fruitful and even essential for connecting the dots between concept and praxis and moving from interpretation to ideology (which is to my mind the principle goal of radical teaching).

Homework that experiments with medium for conceptual work always proves exciting, generative, and fun. In one version of "Afrofuturism and Its Histories," I gave students the following open-ended prompt:
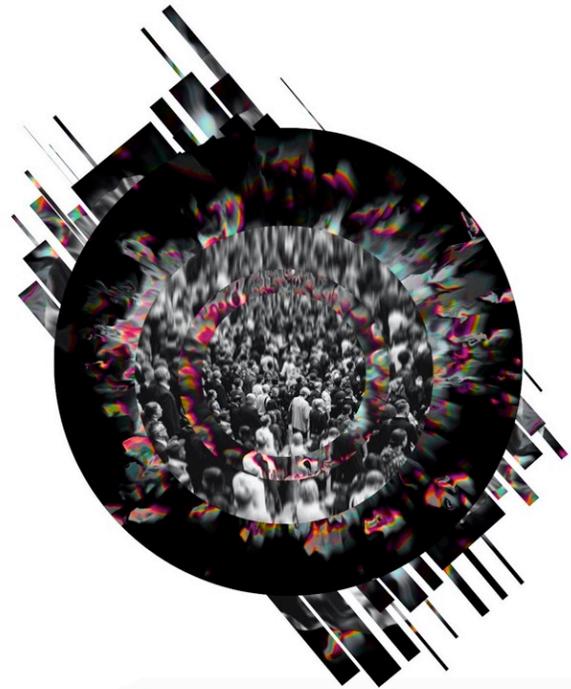
Choose one moment, scene, or character from DuBois's story, "The Comet," to represent visually. Choose an element of the story that relates to an Afrofuturist aesthetic, theme, or figure that we've encountered in Unit 1 of the semester.

Draw, paint, sketch, animate, or otherwise illustrate a piece of "The Comet." You can be as creative as you'd like—perhaps even fabulating parts of the story—but I want you to have one other Afrofuturist text in mind as you work. This can be a visual text, another story, or a

piece of theory that you will use as conceptual or aesthetic inspiration for your illustration.

After you complete this assignment, write a paragraph explaining which visual/literary/theoretical text you used, how it felt to animate the text, and what you learned from animating the story (5-10 sentences). Submit both the illustration and the paragraph.

I've used many similar assignments in other classes, including with students that did not have especially remarkable artistic abilities; it is *always* this assignment that students report, at the end of the semester, as one of their favorites, and I find it to be an important strategy for teaching at SAIC, whose student body includes a high percentage of international students (more than 30% in 2020); these kinds of multimodal compositions can be extremely useful for drawing out students who struggle with formal writing, speak English as a second language, or simply have a hard time "connecting" with nineteenth- and early-twentieth century literature. In this case, I brought a handful of submissions into the following meeting for us to think through. There were many generative submissions, but the examples I've included below highlight the creativity and skill of students at the Art Institute, the conceptual work that's made possible by this practice, and the ways that these assignments open up conversations of medium and form:

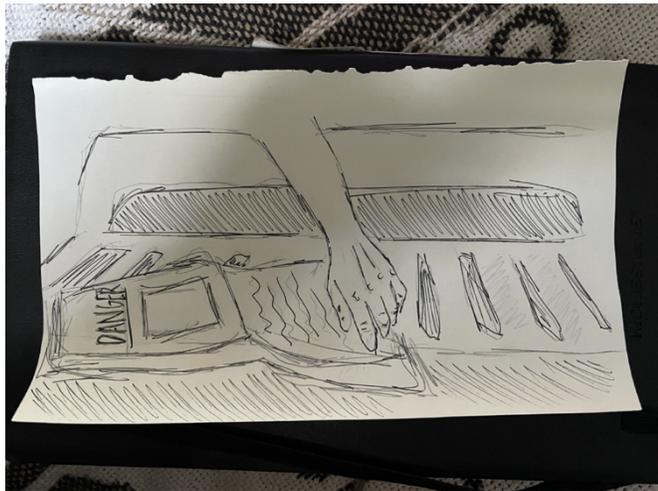ARTWORK BY LUZ VALERIA CHAVEZ (REPRINTED WITH PERMISSION)

When configuring my digital collage, I thought about Sun Ra's Space is the Place and how power structures are dissolved on a global scale when black people decide to leave Earth's social dynamics and thrive in a new time and place. I related this notion of the racial issue being not only addressed locally or within an immediate location but something that can only be confronted

globally, even cosmically. I used repetitive circular forms and straight lines to allude to this notion of the "global scale" and New York's architectural aesthetics. Within the circular shape, points to the metaphor implied in Jim's words on the first passage of the story, "Human River", which refers to the masses that will be destroyed in the story. I think reproducing my ideas visually is an excellent exercise to reflect and further understand the central afrofuturistic tropes we can find by comparing different narratives we've studied along the course.

ARTWORK BY EZRA AGUSTÍN TIZCARENO (REPRINTED WITH PERMISSION)

A grimy newsboy sat in the gutter with the "last edition" in his uplifted hand: "Danger!" screamed its black headlines. "Warnings wired around the world. The Comet's tail sweeps past us at noon. Deadly gases expected. Close doors and windows. Seek the cellar."' I used this scene because it stuck out to me a lot upon the first reading of the story. It was sort of a gruesome and depressing depiction of the scene, but also the way DuBois characterized the "black headlines" to be reminded me a lot of Nyong'o's essay on Afrofabulation. This wasn't the easiest to create, I started over a couple of times as I'm not an illustrator in any form. If I were to have more time to recreate this scene I would create a photo collage. It was hard to visualize exactly what was being depicted, as I couldn't understand how the newsboy was still sitting on the gutter with an uplifted hand, so I instead drew a drooping hand with a newspaper over the gutter. Drawing this out made me focus more on the emotional and gruesome aspects of the scene and how emotionally distraught Jim was in the story.
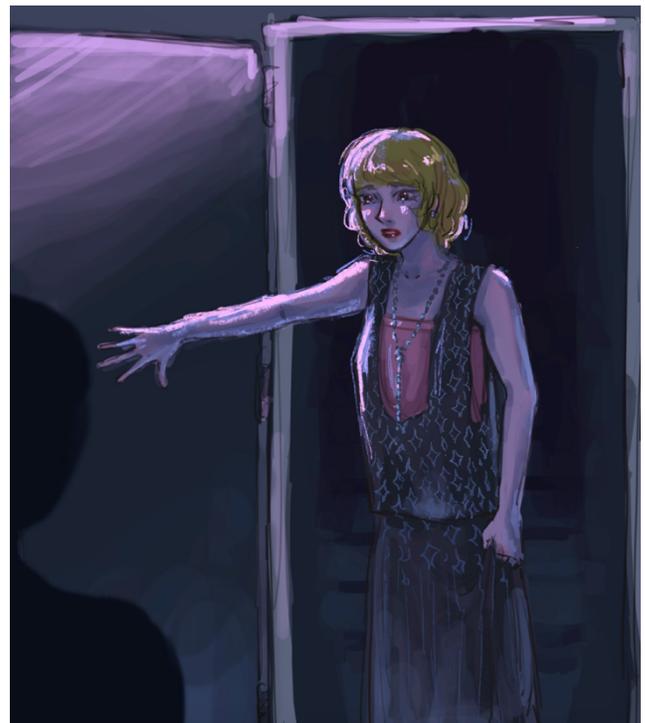

ARTWORK BY XIANG LUO (REPRINTED WITH PERMISSION)

In "The Comet", the conversations and interactions between the black man and the white woman shows a discussion about race and gender. This reminds me of the conversation between Spacer and Frelk in "Aye, and Gomorrah." This piece shows that even though after the comet dropped into earth, the white woman still remembers the racial discrimination. The space station and satellite in the piece represent Spacers. Through painting, I feel the picture that the author imagined and why he expressed it in this way.

ARTWORK BY MOON (REPRINTED WITH PERMISSION)

I illustrated the scene where Julia and Jim meet. The descriptions of Julia are quite plentiful, especially in comparison to Jim's. The other afrofuturist text I had in mind was Delaney's "Aye and Gomorrah". I think I've become very attached to this short story. The colors I associate with A+G are cool colors in the range of blue and purple. Both

stories are attached to some sort of galactic theme and I just really enjoy anything related to space; visuals, theories, and all. It felt cathartic putting what I envisioned in my head into a visual format. For me some emotions just aren't as easily translated into words as it is in artwork. Doing this made me think of how I could visually integrate the time period in which the story was published. I looked up general 1920s fashion and tried my best within an hour and a half (lol).

<p style="text-align:center">***</p>

These assignments were designed to have students see themselves in conversation with our texts rather than as commentators. Although these examples of multimodal interpretive submissions demonstrate that the prompt helped them think through complex ideas, they are also works of art and ideas in and of themselves, and represent a bridge between analytical writing and creative expression; they evince the fact that the production and analysis of art are continuous projects. These kinds of assignments were useful in both versions of "Afrofuturism and Its Histories," but were most meaningful in the anarchaeological version of the course: teaching in conceptual clusters let us encounter the texts as being in touch with one another around enduring questions, and meant that we were regularly discussing the nineteenth century in conversation with our own moment, so that students often saw themselves as thinking *with* our various texts rather than about them.

In the end, the summer course turned out a few different ways. The non-linear historiographical structure worked well to highlight conceptual issues, and although more advanced undergraduates would be able to engage more deeply with our theorists, I found that the structure of the course, which positioned texts in conversation about specific issues, gave dimension to our topics. I was surprised to find that students were very willing to jump across multiple historical periods and make connections between texts that can seem quite different every week, and I realized early on that because of the anarchaeological structure, my lectures in fact had to *especially* highlight historical context, so that their work of connecting conceptual dots could also be sensitive to important differences between the politics and goals of our various texts. This was, of course, also necessary for their ability to see the ways that writers engaged with and work against prevalent ideas of their times. (Pauline Hopkins's *Of One Blood*, for example, which utilizes but warps a one-drop concept of race so prevalent in the early twentieth-century into a psychologized model for identity, required a lot of framing.)

I could see that they did come to regular revelations about our present during discussions, linking representations of surveillance technologies in texts like *Born in Flames* to those of racist policing but also seeing the film's reclamation of television and radio for queer Black women echoed in the "hacking" of social media platforms by BLM activists. This logic of hacking in turn framed our conversation of Sojourner Truth's activism, which for me revealed the potential of anachronistic theoretical frameworks: it allows us to see the nineteenth century in a new way *and* makes Truth conversant with contemporary figures like Janaya "Future" Khan. Images of catastrophe and concomitant social breakdowns led us to use COVID as a testing ground and reflect on the ways that COVID revealed the fragility of some social structures and the endurance of others. Afrofuturism's disruption of received notions about racial identity, its immense history of *queering* identity, and even its examination of the category of the human provoked some of the most interesting conversations I've participated in as a teacher; at the same time, it meant that some of the work we did raised more questions than answers about contemporary social justice issues. But their final papers were fantastic, and many showed an understanding of the ideological consequences and possibilities of Afrofuturist politics, thinking through global issues around race, gender, nationality, and especially sexual orientation that defined 2021. Many were invested in intersectional queer readings that drew from Nyong'o, Kara Keeling, and Clayton Colmon. At the end of the semester, one student wrote a beautiful essay on play as a queer aesthetic in Afrofuturism, and another convincingly reclaimed Samuel Delany's "Aye, and Gomorrah" as a text about asexuality. Another reflected on "trans" as a metaphorical or literal modifier in many kinds of Afrofuturist ideation. Others built on conversations about form and medium; one particularly successful essay explored multimodality as an Afrofuturist aesthetic, centering on music and sound in Afrofuturist literature and music from the nineteenth to the twenty-first century. In classroom thought experiments, students (often enthusiastically) explored the multivalent possibilities of identity.

The first year of COVID took a visible toll on everyone: despite our increased Zoom literacy and despite everyone's creative efforts to make it work, sometimes it just didn't. Internet connections would fail, students had to Zoom in from awkward places, and despite my efforts to move more in-class work to asynchronous assignments after realizing that so many of my students were in different countries, several international students had to drop the course because of the difficulties over time differences. Where I would normally introduce variety into our schedule by taking field trips to the Art Institute or other local exhibits, sitting on Zoom for three days a week, two hours a day, became repetitive. A lot of the content in our week on "race as technology" had to be scrapped because we were simply short on time. *I* was spread thin. The lectures and exercises took an enormous amount of time to put together, and on top of historical and theoretical grounding, I was giving them writing instruction and grading their writing. I was also preparing to be on the academic job market for the first time. This was the somewhat painful timeliness of teaching Afrofuturist themes under the conditions of COVID: technologies help us come together despite geographical distance; speculative images of the future, dystopian and utopian, abound; alienation and precarity feel all too real for some of us.

At the same time, these resonances gave our work dimension, and my efforts to teach a history of the present were aided by a few different major coincidental occurrences. In the fall of 2021, during the more protracted and linear semester of "Afrofuturism and Its Histories," an exhibit called "Before Yesterday We Could Fly: An

Afrofuturist Period Room" opened at The Met. The exhibition collects historical fragments from homes in nineteenth-century Seneca Village, whose residents and landowners were predominantly Black, and explicitly frames its archival-historical methodology as "[p]owered by Afrofuturism—a transdisciplinary creative move that centers Black imagination, excellence, and self-determination" and uses speculation based on historical fragments to construct a world: "Like other period rooms throughout the Museum, this installation is a fabrication of a domestic space that assembles furnishings to create an illusion of authenticity. Unlike these other spaces, this room rejects the notion of one historical period and embraces the African and African American diasporic belief that the past, present, and future are interconnected and that informed speculation may uncover many possibilities." As much as this event in the art world enlivened our discussion of Afrofuturism-as-methodology, it also made it clear that our work in the classroom had stakes—that our work as a class was part of ongoing, unfinished historical business.

During week four of our summer session, Lauren Berlant died. In *Cruel Optimism*, they write that "a situation is a genre of living that one knows one's in but that one has to find out about, a circumstance embedded in one's life but not in one's control. A situation is a disturbance, a sense genre of animated suspension—not suspended animation" (195). Many of us are familiar with this experience of animated suspension, and austerity measures have only worsened under COVID. But as Berlant insists, the outcome of a situation is inherently uncertain; we simply don't how it will turn out. During week six, the last week of our summer session, Lil Nas X gave us the Afrofuturist gift that was his 2021 BET performance. Against a backdrop of spinning pyramids and donning Egyptian garb, Lil Nas ended his performance of "Montero: Call Me by Your Name" with a passionate kiss with one of his dancers. A few days later, I closed our semester with a screening and discussion of the performance. I think it made us all time-sensitive—aware that the uncanniness of the present belies the queerness of time.

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