

RADICAL TEACHER

A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

Time in Afrofuturism, Classroom Time, and Carceral Time

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Capitalist crisis has tightened up the time of the world: all over, people are in sync in their sense of contingency and social fragility, even if they might have wildly different accounts of it. Sometimes this recognition is unbearable and produces violence: because we know the change and the loss has already happened, and yet it is unbelievable and unbearable, while being borne.

- Lauren Berlant, 2012 (original emphasis)

I have been teaching a course on Afrofuturism at a small liberal arts college since 2004. Emerson is located in downtown Boston and, despite making some recent progress towards increasing diversity, it is still a predominantly white, expensive, private college. Part of the African American and African Diaspora Studies minor, the course is an upper-division literature course which often attracts film students as well. Over the past seventeen years students' responses to the course materials have deepened and shifted, especially since the time of the 45th presidency. Black writers, artists, and critical theorists have a long history of critique of the present via creative thought about the future. Drawing inspiration from Black pasts, they have forged radical visions and actively worked to create more just societies. The course draws on the radical imaginations of past and present struggles for social justice, aiming to envision new worlds. Learning to think outside the status quo's limits is crucial work for undoing oppressions of all kinds, and the course aims to study Afrofuturism and Black Speculative Fiction that leads the way. Hopefully, students finish the course seeing literature's potential to intervene in a dystopic present and offer pathways to a more just future. These days more and more students send emails after graduating, commenting on the ways the texts we read are continuing to influence them. If students entered the class having minimal experience of dystopic conditions in their own lives, then Octavia Butler's 2024 setting for a Southern California aflame in *Parable of the Sower* perhaps felt distantly futuristic back in 2004. In 2020, however, many students readily spoke about packing their "go bag." The ongoing crisis of structural racism is perhaps now *in sync*, to use Berlant's phrase, with the climate crisis, as well as late capitalism's distribution of precarity, which has indeed "tightened up the time of the world." And then there is the time of COVID.

Much Afrofuturist literature, art, and scholarship invites questions about the nature of time. Is time linear, cyclical, or spiral? In this essay I describe teaching Afrofuturism during the time of COVID in two distinct but related spaces, a campus classroom and a prison classroom, hoping to show that Afrofuturist texts enable students to envision and enact creative interventions in multiple dystopic presents. Novels such as Nalo Hopkinson's *Brown Girl in the Ring* feature protagonists who exist at crossroads between past, present, and future. Ti-Jeanne's ability to thrive in the novel's futuristic setting of Toronto is dependent on her learning to adapt her grandmother's Caribbean-based ecological knowledges to her urban setting and carry this wisdom forward in ways that will help her to care for herself and her community. Afrofuturist artworks "decenter whiteness, Eurocentrism, and Western cosmologies and offer new visions of what could come to be" (Jackson & Moody-Freeman 9). This decentering calls into question damaging

social constructs that have been normativized and universalized: a binary conception of gender, species boundaries, racializations and their attendant hierarchies, and the geopolitics of the nation state as an order of social organizing. When viewed through the lens of Diaspora Studies, Afrofuturist literature opens up a space to reconsider other ways of thinking, to imagine otherwise, and to activate creative pathways via a Black radical imagination. As Robin D.G. Kelley notes in the Introduction to his book, *Freedom Dreams*, "There are very few contemporary political spaces where the energies of love and imagination are understood and respected as powerful social forces" (4). We read Kelley's chapter early in the semester, looking toward the course texts in search of the "emancipation of thought" that envisions a "total transformation of society" (5). Part of moving toward that vision is a rejection of forms of Eurocentric thought built upon erasure. Referring to the work of Sylvia Wynter, Françoise Vergès explains that Western liberal humanism is "fundamentally inadequate in comprehending the humanity of late modernity's structurally marginalized and narratively condemned populations" (original emphasis). Afrofuturism is a powerful antidote to these forms of narrative erasure and condemnation. As Reynaldo Anderson notes, Afrofuturism can establish counternarratives to delegitimize the "Eurocentric social contract that institutionalizes and maintains the power of the elite" (179). In this course, students encounter texts that begin from the perspective of the counternarrative, and I hope students leave the course understanding the "Eurocentric social contract" to be a powerful fiction.

Decentering "western" man leads to the decentering of all of that subject's attendant ideologies and teaches us to reject their violence. Learning about other forms of historical consciousness is thus imperative, and we begin with an introduction to the *Sankofa* principle within *Akan* culture, which has been taken up by many diasporic artists, writers, and scholars as translating to, "It is not wrong to go back for that which you have forgotten." In her article, "The Emergence of *Sankofa* Practice in the United States: A Modern History," Christel Temple charts the diasporan use of *sankofa* epistemology, quoting Maulana Karenga's (2001) *Introduction to Black Studies*: "beginning with Black History stresses also the importance of the ongoing project of historical recovery to every field in Black Studies. This process is called *sankofa*, an *Akan* word which means 'to return and recover it.' This involves returning to the rich resource of the African past, or history, and using it as a foundation to improve the present and enhance the future" (Karenga 78, cited in Temple 140). For many students, if they have been raised and educated within "western" institutions, this may necessitate at least a provisional acquisition of what VèVè Amasasa Clark has termed "diaspora literacy," since Karenga's retrieval and reclamation of the past is critical and analytical, seeking "deeper and larger meanings that routine competence cannot provide" (Karenga 555 cited in Temple 141; Clark). *Sankofa* principles inform our reading of Octavia Butler's *Kindred*, for example. What does Dana learn about her ancestors through being abducted into their actual worlds, as opposed to reading about the history of slavery in books? How does she carry that knowledge forward into her

present? Butler's use of actual time travel in the novel allows Dana an emotional understanding of choices made by her direct ancestors. In this sense, literally going back to the past reframes Dana's knowledge about the agency of her enslaved forebears.

While Dana travels backwards in time and moves repeatedly between the past and the present, Nalo Hopkinson's protagonist, Ti-Jeanne, in *Brown Girl in the Ring*, travels out of time and into the spirit world. VèVè Amasasa Clark's discussion of the ways *marasa* consciousness imagines beyond the binary helps frame Ti-Jeanne's dilemma. Ti-Jeanne's initial rejection of her grandmother's knowledge ultimately imperils her, and she can only move forward by reclaiming those knowledges and shaping them to her own needs. Ti-Jeanne's experiences living in a futuristic Toronto place her in multiple spaces, situated between spiritual practices, medicinal and herbal knowledges, and her relationships with her new baby, her estranged mother, and the grandmother who raised her.

Questioning linear historical narratives, we begin talking about time on the first day of class, viewing together John Akomfrah's cinematic essay, *The Last Angel of History*. When students hear Greg Tate pointing out that alien ships already landed on the west coast of Africa over 400 years ago, that any UFO stories they may have heard have already happened, they then read Chapter Two of Olaudah Equiano's narrative from a new perspective. Throughout their educations many students have encountered texts by formerly enslaved people, and they are familiar with the narrative of linear progress from captivity to freedom, a teleology that has been long enshrined in the institutionalization of those texts. To return to Equiano's text then, noting the ways it also reads as a "science fiction" narrative of alien abduction that actually happened, jolts students' sense of what is past and what is futuristic. Since dystopic literature is a popular form of cultural production, perhaps especially as a category of young adult literature, many students are used to thinking about dystopia as future fiction. Equiano's vivid descriptions of the terrors of the Middle Passage show students pre-existing dystopias that have shaped the present.

Samuel Delany's position that science fiction doesn't predict the future, but rather offers a significant distortion of the present, offers a vantage on the present that many privileged students have not before seen. Delany's essay, "Racism and Science Fiction," shows students the ways racism is structural, systemic, and also an everyday occurrence. For some (white privileged) students this awareness of racism as structural may feel like a "revelation." The contingency of "revelation" is something that we discuss: what forms of blindness enable one to benefit from white privilege without recognizing it as such? How have dominant narratives of individualism, economic structures of neoliberalism, historical tales of manifest destiny, in short the myths that bolster the US nation state, erased not only its actual history, but its ongoing violences? When students understand how deeply structural racism is, then they are eager to read and think about ways to undo the structures that support white supremacy. In 2020 students especially wanted to read and discuss literature that presented a way out of these conditions. While students

appreciate the depth and power of Ralph Ellison's writing in *Invisible Man*, some felt that it should not qualify as Afrofuturist literature, as they did not see the narrator's final position as liberatory. Students described feeling triggered by the scenes of overt violence within the novel as well as by scenes of stifling control and suppression of the narrator's own will and desire. Students similarly felt that Octavia Butler's short story, "Bloodchild," should have a content warning for domestic and sexual violence, despite the fact that the characters are not identified as human. Experiences teaching these texts in 2020 have shown me that critical dystopia as a genre that serves to critique present injustice and warn of a future that will flow from it risk inflicting further trauma on students, even when creative resistance and survival are the focus of our discussions about these protagonists.

I was teaching this course on Afrofuturism in spring 2020 when COVID hit. Teaching Afrofuturism and teaching during COVID thus brought certain contingencies *in sync*. COVID seemed to add an exclamation point to Ruth Wilson Gilmore's definition of structural racism: "Racism, specifically, is the state-sanctioned or extralegal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death" (2006 28). COVID showed, for those who had not seen it before, how the health disparities created by structural racism were manifesting Black death. Reading Derrick Bell's "The Space Traders" alongside contemporary articles about racialized "essential workers" facing exposure to the virus, for example, made Bell's critique of Black sacrifice for white interest very immediate. Students could clearly see the ways folks were being asked to sacrifice their own health and that of their families for the sake of a false construct called "the economy" and, more directly, for the convenience of those who had the means to stay at home and order food for delivery, to take one example. For some students in 2020, COVID "lifted the veil" (brown). As adrienne maree brown noted, this invisible virus was "making the wrong structures and systems and beliefs so visible" (brown). Brown's framing is important since it emphasizes conditions that were already extant, but had perhaps been possible for some to ignore. Did COVID stop a form of capitalist time from rushing onward?

In addition to unveiling damaging forms of abandonment, COVID also altered many peoples' experience of time, as routines were upended, movement was curtailed, and days seemed to blend into one another. But here, too, structural inequalities were made visible. Interrogating concepts of time raises important questions about power and social hierarchies. As Michael Hanchard notes, "Time, when linked to relations of dominance and subordination, is another social construct that marks inequality between various social groups" (253). In a virtual conference called "Time for Black Studies," Roderick Ferguson spoke about time as a mechanism of state power: "Think here of the time required for people to wait in line to vote, and to receive a vaccine, and the time meted out by judges in convictions [...] In the context of Black people, it's easy to see how the state uses time to withhold and circumscribe rights and political status. The state's racial project, with regard to Blacks, has time as part of its arsenal." There is perhaps no more destructive part of this arsenal than the prison

industrial complex, the vast container for “the time meted out by judges in convictions,” and the state’s most violent method of withholding and circumscribing rights and political status.

During the early time of COVID, I was also photocopying these Afrofuturism course materials for DOC approval to teach the course in Fall 2020 as part of the Emerson Prison Initiative. Established in 2017, EPI offers Emerson College classes, taught by Emerson faculty and bearing official college credits toward the granting of a BA, to students currently incarcerated at MCI-Concord, a state-run prison. MCI-Concord is a men’s medium security facility located about 45 minutes northwest of Boston, where there has never before been sustained tertiary educational programming inside (Gellman). There were twelve students enrolled in this first cohort, and Afrofuturism was slated for the third year of their degree path. Due to COVID, in-person teaching in the prison was delayed until September 30, so in late August 2020 I introduced the course via old-fashioned paper mail. I wrote that:

the present moment seems entangled in both dystopia and hope. On one hand we are in the middle of a global health pandemic that does not affect everyone equally, and is exacting a toll most heavily on people of color and poor people, many of whom have insufficient access to health care and insurance. We are also in the midst of the ongoing pandemic of structural racism, which continues to unleash all kinds of state-sanctioned violence on African Americans, from police brutality, to environmental injustice, to educational disparities, and more. But at the same time folks are out in the streets protesting and mobilizing against violence and structural inequality. Longtime activist, intellectual, and scholar, Angela Davis, (whom we’ll read in this class) said she has not seen such a widespread global movement of antiracist activism in her life! Grassroots mutual care networks are springing up everywhere, and people are delivering food, planting urban gardens, and creating support systems to check on one another. Everyday people know the power of collective action and use their imagination to envision and create better futures. It is inside this productive space between dystopia and hope that Afrofuturist literature, art, film, and music resides.

I shared with the students Arundhati Roy’s powerful statement from April 2020, in which she described the pandemic as a portal: “Historically, pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew. This one is no different. It is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next. We can choose to walk through it, dragging the carcasses of our prejudice and hatred, our avarice, our data banks and dead ideas, our dead rivers and smoky skies behind us. Or we can walk through lightly, with little luggage, ready to imagine another world. And ready to fight for it.” Roy’s words seemed to call for Afrofuturism’s methods of radical imagination, and I hoped that our course, the texts we’d read together, the discussions we might have, could become some sort of a portal, a way to make it through the pandemic and emerge on the other side with a new vision. There are perhaps no doors more solid than those in a prison; and yet it is also true that education in prison can sometimes become a

portal, a literal pathway to a different future for incarcerated students.

When I first entered the prison on the last day of September, students were just coming out of an extended period of modified operations in the prison, with limited internal movement and all the men confined to their cells for up to 23.5 hours per day for weeks at a time, unable to congregate due to social distancing requirements, a situation replicated in many prisons throughout the country. The trauma of this experience, on top of the murder of George Floyd showing on their television screens over and over, created a dystopia not to be imagined. (Though this trauma was later exceeded.) We met face-to-face (masked and socially-distanced) as a class until Thanksgiving, when once again the prison reverted to 23.5 hours/day confinement, as COVID cases began to surge through the population. Many of the students in the class continued to engage with the course materials throughout this period, and we were able to communicate via mail. Finally, teachers were allowed to re-enter the prison on April 6, 2021, compressing the remaining required thirteen hours of classroom time into three days of meetings. The teaching of this fifteen-week course thus followed a unique structure of time, extending across more than seven months. This version of an Afrofuturism course took on an entirely new relationship to time, extending and dilating, constricting and pausing. While I am always concerned for my students’ well-being, that concern took on a whole new meaning and felt like an emergency. Students inside the prison faced physical and mental health challenges that made our coursework seem trivial.

Instructional time in a college course is typically so visible and quantified -- bounded, divided, and laid out within a structure of weeks on a syllabus, meeting days and hours quantified in timeframes standardized by accrediting committees. It is easy to see the ways the state controls time within the prison as a form of violence. How do we identify the ways the state controls the time in non-carceral classrooms? Federal and state student loans are tied to institutional compliance with accreditation standards regulating credit hours and time in class. Because the incarcerated students in this program are enrolled in a four-year degree-granting BA, the institutional time of accreditation extends into and is even laid over the more overtly violent ways that time is structured within daily life inside the prison, where every movement is marked and bounded by the DOC’s control of time. While COVID disrupted the rigidity of academic time, derailing the syllabus plan and creating a suspension of time, the state prison system’s imposition of segregated time created far more difficult challenges for incarcerated students. For teachers, concern for student physical survival and mental health also met up against the provost’s demand for adherence to credit-hour requirements.

During the time from mid-November 2020 to early April 2021, the course texts became a portal, allowing ongoing conversations about Afrofuturism, as well as enabling the continuation of these students’ work towards their BA’s. Through email, scans, and snail mail, I sent in discussion questions, ideas about the texts, new questions placing each new reading in the ever-changing political contexts we were

all experiencing, including the presidential election and the January 6 insurrection at the U.S. Capitol. Our conversations about the stories we were reading, together and yet apart, traveled in through the various levels of transmission. I received pdf scans of handwritten essays in which students communicated their piercing critical analysis of the course material, woven with narratives of their personal histories and immediately lived dystopias. Students also resisted the texts in important ways. A student argued that popular fiction depicting dystopic conditions was not useful to him, as he wrote, "Many speak of and write about dystopias in the future and many enjoy highlighting current social injustices [...] We as a society need to move beyond writing about what is messed up. What are we doing to change things? Dystopia is right here in my face 24-7-365." Students linked moments in their lives before incarceration to scenes in novels we were reading, connecting their own histories to what they were reading. So too did the time of COVID enter their essays, as they documented the physical suffering many experienced with the virus, fears of death, inability to communicate with loved ones, trauma of being confined to a cell, struggles with housing displacement caused by the prison's shifting quarantine measures, loss of access to books and personal property, and on and on.

I wrote wholly insufficient letters to the students expressing my concern for their health and safety and offered detailed comments on students' essays, trying to substitute for the lively and energetic conversations that had previously marked our shared time in the classroom, and mailed the pages back. According to the definitions required by collegiate accreditors, these hours were a quantifiable part of the course time, as we were engaging in *asynchronous* coursework, a legitimate substitute for in-person teaching and learning. I passed the students "reading notes" as a way of creating conversations; and students continued to converse with one another outside the space of the classroom, maintaining in any ways possible the forms of community that sustained them inside. I sometimes heard about these conversations via "reading responses" I'd receive in the mail. Across the time of the pandemic, across carceral time, and across academic institutional credit-hour time, I hoped we were somehow keeping a portal open for a sustained promise of futurity.

Even without COVID, teaching in prison requires a readjustment of the concept of time. People outside prisons talked about how COVID altered their sense of time, as many faced forms of confinement they had not previously experienced. Incarcerated students already knew this, had already reckoned with the need to make an imposed time into something else, to make a forced confinement liveable. They seek to do more than mark time, and instead move through it and make use of it by reading, studying, counseling, mentoring, advocating, and supporting loved ones inside and outside the prison. In this sense incarcerated students are already Afrofuturists. Incarcerated students perceive the ways that enslaved people who nurtured their loved ones, plotted plans to run, and created community under the most oppressive conditions were early Afrofuturists. Those onboard slave ships, experiencing the first alien abduction to a completely unknowable future, who nevertheless envisioned surviving, shared food scraps,

enacted slave ship rebellions across language barriers and community origin relationships were Afrofuturists. Students in the class saw the literature we read as shaping a future of Black agency. An incarcerated student wrote that "Just as stories from the Bible, that some consider literal and others symbolic, influenced the agency of so many enslaved Black people to organize, to run to freedom, and to recognize their right to be, Afrofuturism and the poignant stories being told through this medium can shape minds to think bigger than the present social constructions." Drawing on past knowledges and projecting a future against all odds is clearly an Afrofuturist mode and practice.

Once students recognize the ways that past injustices haunt the present in new forms, they readily question the linear progress narratives they have been told about history. VèVè Clark's discussion of history as spiral resonated most with incarcerated students, who argued that history is not just a loop, but rather it is a repetition with a difference. One student wrote, "It's not the same old thing happening all over again, but the same force with a new twist, and you can get hit in the head with the twist, depending on where you're standing." *Sankofa* principles of looking back to the past while moving forward into the future had specific meaning for incarcerated students. Their writing about the texts often journeyed back to their own pasts, reflecting on these experiences in light of what we were reading and discussing. *Brown Girl in the Ring* was one of the favorite novels of the class, and many students found resonance with the intergenerational family relationships depicted in the novel and in their own lives. Some recognized Hopkinson's depiction of "The Burn" as an example of an under-resourced, over-policed community with similarities to places where they grew up. Others were thrilled to see vodun and Caribbean spiritual practices that they knew well represented in popular literature. This form of representation counters the cultural erasure which is still a part of so many students' educations. At the end of the course one student wrote that Afrofuturism "makes it ordinary to be black. In a white world black is taboo, wild, untamed, etc. Afrofuturism enables black to be/become what *it* desires rather than become what whites desire. Afrofuturism frees the mind of racialized thoughts and allows individuals to set their own heading. This in my opinion is true agency."

Afrofuturism enables black to be/become what it desires rather than become what whites desire. Afrofuturism frees the mind of racialized thoughts and allows individuals to set their own heading.

In an article about teaching in prison, Anne Dalke and Jody Cohen frame asynchronicity in another mode, beyond the institutional demands of credit hours: with hope, they posit that "class gatherings also include, profoundly, the writers whose work you are reading together. You are all untimely contemporaries, together creating a different 'reality of time,' 'cultivating solidarity with asynchronous

others” (145). Across the multiple temporalities of this course, students connected disparate texts to their own histories and experiences, sometimes concluding that their own sense of agency was greater than that of the characters. Analyzing “Spider the Artist,” a short story by Nnedi Okorafor, one student made a powerful analogy to Okorafor’s discussion of oil pipelines in the Niger Delta, writing, “Eme and I are ‘Pipeline People,’” but adding that “Eme and I are surrounded by the pipeline differently. Eme is affected by the world produced from the product inside the pipeline. I am the product in the pipeline.” Students had read a definition of *critical* dystopia as involving protagonists in the “process of taking control over the means of language, representation, memory and interpellation [as] a crucial weapon and strategy in moving dystopian resistance from an initial consciousness to an action that leads to a climactic event that attempts to change the society” (Baccolini and Moylan 6). In his paper about “Spider the Artist” and *Brown Girl in the Ring*, this student carefully noted the ways Eme and Ti-Jeanne confronted power structures in their worlds and reappropriated language as a strategy of their resistance. He wove his own life histories into his essay, detailing the complex and varied ways he is working towards his liberation -- through legal channels, group leadership, community support, psychological healing and more. His essay concluded, “Whereas both Ti-Jeanne and Eme were unsure of what they were going to do moving forward, I have a multi-lane plan [...] For Ti-Jeanne and Eme the end is written. For me, my end is yet to begin. My life may be a dystopia art can never imitate, but I might have to put it in book form or write the screenplay myself.”

The rights of incarcerated individuals are erased every day in this country, and the crisis of mass incarceration is of course just another site where we see the state’s work to engineer the literal erasure of Black life. While Afrofuturist literature and art has always been about countering this type of erasure, students in different educational settings experience other forms of structural abandonment in different ways. Ruth Wilson Gilmore noted in June 2020:

In the United States, where organized abandonment has happened throughout the country, in urban and rural contexts, for more than forty years, we see that as people have lost the ability to keep their individual selves, their households, and their communities together with adequate income, clean water, reasonable air, reliable shelter, and transportation and communication infrastructure, as those things have gone away, what’s risen up in the crevices of this cracked foundation of security has been policing and prison. (Intercept)

Incarcerated students are living, more acutely than others, directly inside this state of abandonment, are all too well aware of its structural nature, and seek ways to not just survive but thrive despite it. The final assignment for the course invited students to write their own Afrofuturist story, with the hope of activating the pleasures of narrative and creativity, and the potential of the imagination to be both radical and joyful, a portal and a form of transport. Reflecting on Afrofuturist theories we had read, a student wrote that “Using Clark, Kelley, and Eshun, we can see that if we visualize and begin the healing process in the mind (like a surrealist) many good things can evolve. We don’t

have to accept the decayed ideologies that hold most of us subjugated by the wealthy. In fact, we can oppose and develop our own ideas to a better future.”

This is the promise of Afrofuturism, inviting students into this space between dystopia and hope, critique and creativity. When students read texts critiquing the structural conditions that create dystopic pasts, presents, and futures, they want to see the undoing of these conditions. They are eager to read the creative intervention, the ways to think outside of structural abandonment. Creative works that intervene in institutional violence, reimagining a different world, enable the decolonization of the mind necessary to create social change. Prison abolitionist Mariame Kaba notes the way the prison industrial complex has occupied the imaginations of people in this country (25). To undo that mental occupation, Kaba argues that collective art-making is a necessary step towards dismantling the PIC, and that leadership should come from those inside the walls. Incarcerated students have already developed strategies to survive the sentence of time by claiming agency over their future as best they can. In the face of organized abandonment, they create forms of community support and connection, mentorship, and care – as Saidiya Hartman has noted, “care is the antidote to violence.”

Teachers were able to re-enter the prison in April 2021 and, with Bob Marley’s “small axe” in mind, I asked the students whether they wanted to share what “small acts” had allowed them to make it through the time of COVID. People spoke of their music, workouts they could do in a cell, books they read, and any small routines of care for others and self-care that remained possible in the most oppressive conditions of the institution. These acts of resistance and survivance sustained them through experiences of isolation and fear. In those last few days of our time together we wanted to celebrate the conclusion of the course and reflect on the materials that had meant the most to the class. We watched Jenn Nkiru’s beautiful short film, “Rebirth is Necessary,” a project that weaves a wide range of footage from Black film archives and historical documentaries with artistic and stylistic images of liberation and joy. The creativity of this film focuses on a historical thread of love and community, bringing that past into a future of continued agency, empowerment, and creative expression. Students also wanted to re-watch a short TedTalk by Ron Finley about planting gardens in South Central, Los Angeles. Finley’s demonstration of how he turned empty lots and sidewalk margins into plots of vibrant vegetables was seen as a powerful form of social change as well as a committed act of care for the health of the community of South Central, both envisioning and creating a better future. We also spent some class time hearing from the creative pieces some students had written for their final work in the class. They had the option to write an Afrofuturist story of their own, analyzing how it demonstrated their own definition of this creative genre. Introducing his own story, “The Griot’s Genealogy,” one student described the importance of African principles in Afrofuturist works: “*Sankofa*, meaning ‘go back and get it,’ emphasizes the importance of cultural practices rooted in African beliefs. *Ashe*, or ‘the power to make things happen,’ represents the ability to intervene in the future. Thus, Afrofuturism removes the barrier of time for the purpose of

survival, growth, and flourishing. I define Afrofuturism as a portal because it enables the past to speak to the future and uses the future to intervene in the present." Students in both classrooms--on campus and inside the prison--reject texts that make them feel stuck in a repeating wheel of historical traumas. Even when such texts feature protagonists who resist the conditions of their lives and create modes of survival and flourishing, if the text does not offer an intervention, creatively showing how the future can look different from the present, students do not judge it to be a true Afrofuturist text. As an incarcerated student wrote in his comments at the end of class, "A main component of Afrofuturism is envisioning a different future, and part of that envisioned future is changing the present, meaning putting forth the efforts to reveal an alternate narrative to the false narrative perpetuated for centuries by a European lens, which is usually false in nature. So by way of art, poetry, dance, music, writings, films and other forms, we push and teach our truth as we know it [...] thus giving Black people agency and self-realization." Several students were motivated to continue to write Afrofuturist fiction, and several also noted that they now considered themselves Afrofuturists. While some incarcerated students began the semester openly questioning the use-value of reading fiction, ultimately the forms of critique and future visioning that Afrofuturism offers provided many with a sense of creative empowerment. Offering to students this sense of agency and the ability to define what Afrofuturism means to them is what has made this such a rewarding subject to discuss together in classrooms both inside and outside the walls of the prison.

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