



# Overview of AfroFuturism

WRITTEN BY TANANARIVE DUE  
ARTWORK BY NIKKOLAS SMITH

## A. What is Afrofuturism? Why does it matter?

Afrofuturism is the science fiction and fantasy of the African Diaspora: comics, futurism, myths, magical realism, horror. Whether it's stories imagining African deities or Shuri as a technological genius in *Black Panther*, Afrofuturism expands our vision of ourselves: past, present *and* future. Like *Black Panther*, Afrofuturistic works often blend the traditional with the futuristic.

Afrofuturism--also known as the Black Speculative Arts Movement--exists in films, literature, comics, visual arts or music. In music, Afrofuturism breaks barriers: fusion stylings and groundbreaking music in the works of musical artists like Sun Ra, Miles Davis, Janelle Monae, George Clinton and Beyoncé.

Afrofuturism shows us people of African descent at the heart of the future and worlds of magic. Writers like Nnedi Okorafor, N.K. Jemisin, Nalo Hopkinson, Samuel R. Delany, and the late Octavia E. Butler create convincing worlds that point out flaws in our own world -- and help steer us toward building a better tomorrow.

Afrofuturism is important because it inspires CHANGE: Afrofuturistic artists showcase omissions and injustice. Like in *Black Panther*, Afrofuturism helps artists use pure imagination to highlight real-world problems and inspire solutions.

As Octavia E. Butler wrote: "All that you Touch, you Change."

## B. What is the difference between science fiction and Afrofuturism? Or is there no difference?

Traditional science fiction is storytelling about the application or discovery of scientific principles, discoveries, or perspectives. Often stated as "what if" ("what if robots ran the world?"), "if only" ("if only Lincoln hadn't been assassinated") and "If this goes on" ("if populations continue to increase, we'll run out of food."). Often, this is futurism about social or technological changes, time travel, and alternate histories.

Afrofuturism centers *black* fantasies, futuristic experiences, influences and characters, often with a critical or healing emphasis related to racial history. Examples are Octavia E. Butler's *Dawn* ("What if a nuclear war wiped out most of humanity and aliens chose a black woman to lead the repopulation of Earth?"), Nnedi Okorafor's *Lagoon* ("What if aliens landed on the coast of Lagos, Nigeria?") or Steven Barnes's *Lion's Blood* ("What if the Americas had been colonized by the Africans bringing European slaves?")

Afrofuturism is often science fiction, but not all science fiction is Afrofuturism.

### **C. What is Afrofuturism's relationship to notions of power, resistance, and community in blackness?**

Afrofuturism is also an artistic resistance movement that helps blacks break free of conceptual binds. Like *Black Panther*, Afrofuturism fights erasure, showcases black cultures, and broadens future black leadership models.

There is a natural connection between Afrofuturism and resistance because it is so revolutionary, inspiring ideas for how to create change. A 2015 conference at Princeton University called "Ferguson is the Future" blended activists and artists, and in 2013 Spelman College hosted the "Octavia Butler Celebration of Arts and Activism." The anthology *Octavia's Brood: Science Fiction from Social Movements*, edited by Adrienne Maree Brown and Walidah Imarisha, showcases stories by activists who feel inspired by Afrofuturism. Brown also uses leadership models from Octavia E. Butler's Afrofuturism to facilitate workshops nationwide. (She wrote a book on her approach: *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds*.)

### **D. What's the history of AfroFuturism?**

Afrofuturism has existed since the first enslaved Africans sang spirituals imagining a better future existence in Heaven. In 1773, poet Phillis Wheatley, an enslaved woman, wrote about traveling in space in her poem "On Imagination." Activist and author W.E.B. Du Bois published a post-apocalyptic short story called "The Comet" in 1920: the only survivors were a black man and a white woman.

Here are some milestones in Afrofuturism:

**1920:** W.E.B. Du Bois publishes the science fiction story "The Comet."

**1966:** Black science fiction pioneer Samuel R. Delany wins the Nebula Award for his novel *Babel-17*.

**1976:** Octavia E. Butler publishes her first novel, *Patternmaster*.

**1994:** Cultural critic Mark Dery coins the term "Afrofuturism" in his essay "Black to the Future" about early Afrofuturists such as Samuel R. Delany.

**1998:** Scholar Alondra Nelson starts an online Afrofuturism community to bring artists and scholars together to discuss both art and technology (such as the "digital divide").

**1995:** Octavia E. Butler (1947-2006) becomes the first science fiction writer to win a MacArthur Genius Grant.

**2000:** Sheree Renee Thomas edits the first black speculative fiction anthology, *Dark Matter: A Century of Speculative Fiction from the African Diaspora*.

**2018:** *The Black Panther* becomes the most successful Afrofuturism work in the world.

In music, eclectic jazz pioneer Sun Ra (1914-1993) is often credited as the Father of Afrofuturism for his creative musicianship and use of technology, pre-dating other performers as diverse as George Clinton, Miles Davis, Janelle Mon e, Solange and rapper Kendrick Lamar. 2018's *Black Panther* is the best example of Afrofuturism on film, but other films include John Sayles's *The Brother from Another Planet* and director Reginald Hudlin's "Cosmic Slop: Space Traders," adapted from the short story by Derrick Bell. (Video link: <https://youtu.be/KOBtFWwHOMQ>)