

**Damion Kareem Scott**

SUNY, Stony Brook

Adjunct Lecturer, Department of Africana Studies

John Jay College of Criminal Justice

The City University of New York

**Society for the Study of Africana Philosophy**

**February 16, 2014 Presentation:**

**What Exactly is 'Black' about Black Futurism? : Dark Electronic Music, Black Science Fiction and Possible Worlds**

“Why I am a Black Futurist - Black Futurism. It’s a concept which speaks to a cosmic mystery. The clues to its existence are scattered throughout myth, archaeological history, folklore and literature, but also through seemingly random, somewhat obscure ‘70s, ‘80s, and ‘90s pop culture references which, when connected, form a celestial key or DNA sequence: P-funk’s “specially designed Afronauts, capable of funkifying entire galaxies” ; the Jonzun Crew’s extraterrestrial pop-lock anthem “Pak Man” –the original, indie label version of which subtly states “black man” in the chorus ; Sun Ra’s low-budget sci-fi, time-traveling, psychedelic opus “Space is the Place”; Parliament’s funky hitchhikers waiting on the “Mothership Connection,” which could very well turn out to be Kool Keith’s Pleiades pimpmobile, the “Space Cadillac.”

Eric K. Arnold, *Black Futurists Speak: An Anthology of New Black Writing*

“I was an Afrofuturist before the term existed. And any sci-fi fan, comic book geek, fantasy reader, Trekker, or science fair winner who ever wondered why black people are minimized in pop culture depictions of the future, conspicuously absent from the history of science, or marginalized in the roster of past inventors and then actually set out to do something about it could arguably qualify as an Afrofuturist as well. It’s one thing when black people aren’t discussed in world history. Fortunately, teams of dedicated historians and culture advocates have chipped away at the propaganda often functioning as history for the world’s students to eradicate that glaring error. But when, even in the imaginary future— a space where the mind can stretch beyond the Milky Way to envision routine space travel, cuddly space animals, talking apes, and time machines— people can’t fathom a person of non-Euro descent a hundred years into the future, a cosmic foot has to be put down.”

Ytasha L. Womack, *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture*

“..unlike what it suggests, Afrofuturism has nothing to do with Africa, and everything to do with power imbalances and cyberculture in the West’.

Tegan Bristow *What is Afrofuturism to Africa?*

“Futurism itself is distinct from the field of ‘futures research’. The former is an aesthetic—almost an ideology—that declares a particular vision, whereas the latter is a practical study of possibilities.”

Scott Smith *Ethnic Futurism in the Gulf*

This paper is divided into two sections that detail the differences and relations between Black Futurism and Afro-Futurism and by extension, other types of actual, geographically specific kinds of Futurisms, for example Asian-Futurism, Indo-Futurism, Middle Eastern 'Gulf-Futurism', etc. The first section is comprised of a sustained analysis of the meaning and references of Black Futurism in which I offer and evaluate competing conceptions of Black Futurism and Afro-Futurism. The second section offers concrete examples of Black Futuristic and Afro-Futuristic art, literature and music and gestures towards Black Futuristic possible, virtual and fictional worlds. My argument provides for an overall framework of how a naturalistic, 'possible world' ontology is able to connect to aesthetic and art historical issues. I clarify genre and stylistic concerns surrounding Black Futurism and relevant, related styles and themes such as Black Science Fiction and Afro-Surrealism. In doing so, the paper presents three fundamental interpretations and uses of the concept of 'blackness' (and the related concept 'darkness') in science fiction film and literature, the literature of contemporary physical theory, and in the aesthetics and metaphysics of fictional and possible worlds. I draw a distinction between standard or orthodox use of the concepts 'black' and 'dark' and the revised emerging conceptions that I defend. In contrast to the many prevalent ideas, an unorthodox view involves a greater appreciation and clearer grasp of the mysterious, vague, and problematic usage of terms such as 'dark' or 'black' in science fiction and academic scientific texts, especially in the literature of contemporary physics. The concept of a 'Dark Ontology' lends itself to a unified phenomenological and conceptual analysis of the metaphysics and semantics of blackness and darkness.

The question is what is 'Blackness' in relation to the future and what is the future in relation to Blackness. The concepts in play are temporal, ontological, aesthetic, moral, and eschatological. Analytical Metaphysics stands to learn a lot from phenomenology and post-phenomenological anti-structuralism over the next few decades. Philosophy of art is often more comprehensive when aesthetic concepts are clearly related and rooted in a sound theory of the ontology of art. Afro-Futurism is a special area in a broader philosophy and history of art as well as having conceptual overlap with critical race theory and Africana Diasporic research. There have been several illuminating articles and books written on the aesthetics of related genres and styles of Afro-Futurism, Black Science Fiction, African American Speculative Fiction, African Science Fiction, Afro-Surrealism, Afro-Punk, Indian Science Fiction, Asian Speculative, Gulf-Futurism, Black Fantasy Literature, Black Queer Sc Fi, etc.

My assertion is that Afro-Futurism and Black Futurism could possibly diverge. While Afro-Futurism is necessarily and sufficiently related to the sociocultural histories of African and 'New World' Africana Diasporic peoples, Black Futurism is only sufficiently related to these same histories and traditions. I argue that transcendental and occasionally real conditions of experience may include perspectives that are practically 'dark'. I will further argue for the existence of actual 'nothings' and 'voids' complete with quasi-casual and dispositional properties. These types of properties are exemplified by the ontological, phenomenological, physical, chemical and psychological relationships

between electromagnetism, visibility, inter-subjectivity and value. The ontological conclusions of this argument will range over the domains of fictional worlds as well as 'actual' worlds. The transition to aesthetics and art historical examples involves embracing the eschatological, the affective and the metaphorical. What we lose in conceptual clarity and logical precision we gain in bodily pleasure and intellectual joy. Specific art, texts, and music that I reference include Black Sci Fi novels and stories (Dubois, Samuel Delaney), Afro-Futuristic and Black Sci Fi Film (*Space is the Place*, *Born in Flames*, *Star Gate*, *Event Horizon*, the Star Trek fictional universe, *The Matrix*, *Pumzi*) and especially the musical futurism of Detroit Techno (Juan Atkins, Jeff Mills, Drexciya), New York Electro and hip hop (Afrika Bambaataa, the Bomb Squad) and London Jungle Drum and Bass (Grooverider, Lemon D, Dillinja, Breakage).

The Black Futurist and Afro-Futurist art that I use to show these ideas are specific to particular geographical locations yet express a global or universal spirit of humanism or transhumanism. They are specific to those who are dark and know it, those who are Black and proud. Those who are actually of recent African descent or not but live by or understand the principle of Blackness projecting forward technologically, temporally, virtually, and actually.