



## **GENDER AND RACE IN SCIENCE FICTION AND THE EMERGENCE OF AFROFUTURISM**

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Afrofuturism, a transdisciplinary subgenre of Science Fiction, represents the changing relations of science as it pertained to African American history and future history. Due to sociological factors and norms, a trend of underrepresentation has been persistent within the areas of Science Fiction, media, and popular culture. Focusing on short stories, novels, contemporary comics, and various films with an Afrofuturistic core, this paper aims to show how African American characters are viewed and represented across media. Each of the primary and scholarly sources, provides an examination of stereotypes and challenges that are factors as to why African Americans are portrayed in a context that is mainly negative and deleterious to the fictional past and future histories, in contrast to how Euro-American characters are portrayed. Within the examination, there will be evidence proving that Euro-American people are privileged over African Americans within Science Fiction. Although the reasons for this privileging varies, the oppression that characterizes contemporary society is most forcefully reduced when the subordinated African Americans don't accept their social status as inevitable, thus leading to the creation of what is known as Afrofuturism. Starting with the Golden Age of Science Fiction to the year 2016, this paper aims to create an Afrofuturistic timeline starting with the early 1930s works of Science Fiction to current texts and films.

**Keywords:** Afrofuturism, Science fiction, Gender, Race.

### **Early Afrofuturism**

Afrofuturism is the created science fictional future for African Americans, mainly written by African American authors. Since the early Twentieth Century Science Fiction has been primarily written by those who sought to keep African Americans in the background, oppressed, residing in a Dystopia, or simply nonexistent. The exclusion of African Americans as well as any person of color from any form of a science fictional future was and continues to be an obvious trend. These fictional future societies are usually misleading, leaving the audience to acknowledge how these societies are actual critical Dystopias under the guise of being a Utopia. Fortunately, there are those who have acknowledged these fictions and have decided to write a different type of Science Fiction that would be inclusionary and without prejudice as opposed to exclusionary. Afrofuturism has been around for quite some time, but it wasn't until the mid-1990s that it was given a name. The term Afrofuturism was coined in 1993 by cultural critic Mark Dery to refer to "speculative fiction that treats African-American themes and addresses African-American concerns in the context of twentieth-century technoculture" (Dery 736). Since the mid-1990s Afrofuturism has expanded beyond the United States to many other countries that have African

descendants are making their mark. Many authors, artists, filmmakers and even musicians in the past have created various works that could have been considered as Afrofuturist, but their works were labeled as something other than Science Fiction. This was due to the lack of a definition in regards to their creations. Although this sub-genre of Science Fiction has now been defined, it has yet to make as big of an impact as Euro-American Science Fiction to date.

The Afrofuturist sub-genre of Science Fiction has been dated back to 1859, when it was previously called Black Science Fiction or even Black Speculative Fiction. These terms were later enveloped by what is known as Afrofuturism and are now one in the same. Lisa Yaszek writes that the term Afrofuturism became the umbrella term used to define how authors have aggressively examined and critiqued American institutions and practices that erase black people and their history from the future imaginary. In her article, "Afrofuturism, Science Fiction, and the History of the Future," Yaszek defines Afrofuturism as "a larger aesthetic mode that encompasses a diverse range of artists working in different genres and media who are united by their shared interest in projecting black futures derived from Afrodiasporic experiences" (52). In the article, "The Languages of Afrofuturism" written by Adriano Elia, the author states that there are many different perspectives on what the term "Afrofuturism" means, due to its multiple connotations. Elia refers to other research writers Alondra Nelson and Kodwo Eshun, who claim that Afrofuturism's main issues, are "sci-fi imagery, futurist themes, and technological innovation in the African diaspora" dealt with in "original narratives of identity, technology, and the future" (Nelson 9). However, Eshun argues that "Afrofuturism's first priority is to recognize that Africa increasingly exists as the object of futurist projection" (Yaszek 48). Furthermore, Eshun challenges the idea of Africa as a metaphor for dystopia and catastrophe, suggesting instead an optimistic – or at least an unbiased – vision of the future of Africa. To this purpose, Afrofuturism is "a program for recovering the histories of counter-futures created in a century hostile to Afro-diasporic projection" (Eshun 301).

Afrofuturism represents the changing relations of science as it pertained to African American history and future histories. Before Afrofuturism was coined, there were many definitions to be created, rewritten and interpreted: Yaszek notes in another article, "An Afrofuturist Reading of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*", that, "as a popular aesthetic movement centered on seemingly fantastic tropes such as 'the encounter with the alien other' and 'travel through time and space,' Afrofuturism holds the potential to bring the Afrodiasporic experience to life in new ways. As Alondra Nelson puts it, the science fictional elements of Afrofuturism provide both 'apt metaphors for black life and history' and inspiration for 'technical and creative innovations' of artists working in a variety of traditional and new media" (Yaszek 299-300). In a way, the "alien other" is representative of the African American people, since most were in a sense abducted by the European and Euro-American colonizers and brought to a land that was not within their own geographical familiarity. These now slaves to the foreign land, were forced to adhere to many customs and ways of life that were in fact alien to them. Stripped of their links to their ancestral cultures, forced into shackles and forbidden to fully assimilate with American cultures, African Americans, have experienced a liberation from the dead hand of history in a way unmatched in history (Patterson 61). So in actuality African Americans became aliens within an alien world that was ruled by Euro-American masters, with no chance of becoming equals.

In the past, African Americans were viewed as less than human and whose purpose was to serve their slave masters. In 1859 a series in *Anglo-African Magazine* and the *Weekly Anglo-African* titled "Blake: Or the Huts of America. A Tale of the Mississippi Valley, the Southern United States and Cuba" was written by Martin Delany. This series is one of the earliest Afrofuturistic writings that told of an alternate history of African Americans due to a fictional slave revolt that takes place within the series. This series was not labeled as Afrofuturist at the time, due to the label not existing yet; rather it was just labeled as a short story series. This was due to the public not knowing what Afrofuturism was. Delany writes that, "there have in all ages, in almost every nation, existed a nation within a nation—a people who although forming a part and parcel of the population, yet were from force of circumstances, known by the peculiar position they occupied, forming in fact, by the deprivation of the political equality with others, no part, and if any, but a restricted part of the body politic of such notions, is also true" (Chiles 323). Delany writes about the social divide in the United States between African American and Euro-

Americans, and the fact that African Americans are “of” the nation, but also simultaneously alienated from the body of the nation. This trend seems to still be prevalent in some parts of society today.

In the published series, *Blake, or Huts of America*, Delany presented an all too common story, of African slaves that resided in Mississippi and are soon separated once one was sold to another slave owner. The story provides the insight into what it may have been like to be a slave in America, stripped of all human rights and dignity, yet never giving up hope for a better future. The story focuses on the slave Henry Holland, who is described as the “most worthy servant” who “places every confidence in what” he is told by his slave owner (9). As the story opens, Henry, who has returned to the plantation to find that his wife has been sold to another slave trader, and is now residing in Cuba. This causes Henry to question his faith in the Christian God he has been told to worship and the slave master he is forced to obey. The other slaves that reside on the plantation are devout followers and now think that Henry has lost his faith: “Henry!” interrogated Daddy Joe—who, apprehending difficulties in the case, had managed to get back to the house. “Yeh gwine lose all yo’ ‘ligion? Wat yeh mean, boy!” “Religion!” replied Henry rebukingly. “That’s always the cry with black people. Tell me nothing about religion when the very man who hands you the bread at communion has sold your daughter away from you!” “Den yeh ‘fen’ God case man ‘fen’ yeh! Take cah, Henry, take cah! mine wat yeh ‘bout; God is lookin’ at yeh, an’ if yeh no’ willin’ trus’ ‘im, yeh need’n call on ‘im in time o’ trouble”. (Delany 21).

In this passage, the reader can now understand that Henry isn’t a follower or a coward, when it comes to what he believes to be right and just. Henry also does not speak the dialect that the rest of the other slaves do. Throughout the series there is page after page, referencing Negro spirituals and quotes from the bible. Delany could have purposely done this to set a sharp contrast between the character Henry and those who reside on the plantations. Rather than accepting what is told to him, Henry develops the idea that God is just another oppressor to the African American people. Later in the series, Henry becomes a revolutionary figure that spreads the word about a slave rebellion. In this sense, the series is strongly an Afrofuturist text, by Delany offering an intelligent and informed alternate history by having Henry envision a different type of life that would result in the betterment of an entire population of people.

The series follows Henry as he goes from plantation to plantation to tell the captive slaves of the rebellion, “sowing the seeds of future devastation and ruin to the master and redemption to the slave, an antecedent more terrible in its anticipation than the warning voice of the destroying Angel in commanding the slaughter of the firstborn of Egypt” (84). The story of Henry and his desire to spark a slave rebellion is much like that of Nat Turner’s rebellion that took place in 1831, where there was an uprising of slaves that went through the state of Virginia and murdered slave owners to free slaves on various plantations. Like the fall of Nat Turner’s rebellion, Henry and his followers also fail and are captured at the end of the series. Although, Delany decided to further this Afrofuturist text and write the second part of the completed series. Here, Henry is now in Cuba with his now freed wife and now has a plan to overthrow the Cuban government and prevent annexation to the United States. There is a constant theme of rebellion and freedom in the series, Delany writes to suggest that slaves must rise and claim their own freedom, instead of waiting for a God to save them.

The racist views and stereotypes throughout Science Fiction and literature in the past leads Chiles to posit in her article titled, “Within and Without Raced Nations: Intratextuality, Martin Delany, and *Blake; Or, the Huts of America*,” that, “unlike Emerson’s transcendental subject who effortlessly becomes “part or parcel of God,” Delany’s “nation within a nation” occupies a fraught space both absorbed by and yet unincorporated into “the body politic of such nations” (Chiles 324). Within the short stories, Delany parallels the history of the Haitian Revolution and the expulsion of the French colonial government, to his own Afrofuturistic writings. Though short stories were, “published in two of the most influential African American periodicals of its time, *Blake*, not only engaged the topics of slavery, black revolution, and emigration but also appeared in proximity to other pieces that addressed these same issues” (Chiles 327). The stark difference was that Delany wrote about the Afrofuturistic history that he envisioned for the past history of slavery as a seventy-four-chapter novel, that was printed in serial form.

Being that in the past, African Americans were only taught about the historical successes of their Euro-American counterparts, the publications by Delany were a huge success. The African American community was in need of uplifting fictions and nonfictions that presented an African American protagonist so much, that the *Weekly Anglo-African* wrote that it was important for African Americans, “to know something else of ourselves through the press than the everyday statements made up to suit the feelings of the base or the interests of our opponents” (Chiles 334). This editorial statement proves that even in the past, African Americans were aware that they were being negatively stereotyped and given the short end of the stick in American society. Later Delany illustrates how African Americans were treated in a court of law, “in the Blake installment in the May 1859 issue of *Anglo-African Magazine*, [characters] Judge Ballard debates with Major Armsted and Colonel Franks the “Compromise measures,” and the “just decision of the Supreme Court . . . that persons of African descent have no rights that white men are bound to respect!” Lest the readers miss the anachronistic reference to *Dred Scott*” (Chiles 336). *Dred Scott* was an enslaved African American man, who in 1857 sued for his and his wife’s freedom due to the fact that they resided in a state where slavery was illegal. The judge who presided over the case, much like the one in Delany’s series stated that African American people have no rights or claims of citizenship in the United States. And it was ruled that, “a negro, whose ancestors were imported into [the U.S.], and sold as slaves”, whether enslaved or free, could not be an American citizen and therefore had no standing to sue in federal court” (*Dred Scott v. Sandford*). Delany’s series provided a way for Delany to rewrite the past history of African Americans by showing that techno modernity was possible, while also publicizing the African American hardships that were faced in the United States in the present. Afrofuturism has always been a reflection of the society in which African Americans reside, and how that society should be changed. Although one may think that Afrofuturism only focuses on the future, it is not without taking a step back into the past in order to see clearly. As Elia states, “Afrofuturism still looks back at the past in order to re-evaluate it, but it primarily seeks to overcome this demoralizing future scenario by showing a positive outlook on the potential of Africa and of the people of the African diaspora in the world” (Elia 85).

The thought of black nationalism within Afrofuturistic texts seems to exude within Delany’s writings about African Americans. It is believed that Delany wrote *Blake* in response to *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, written by Harriet Beecher Stowe in 1852, a novel that helped popularize and further ingrain American society with the negative stereotypes that were forced upon African Americans. This best-selling novel was chock full of characters with racist stereotypes such as Eliza, the tragic mulatto who is of light complexion and over sexualized, Topsy, the representation of the pickaninny black children with their unkempt appearance, Aunt Chloe, the mammy who dotes on the white children and cooks for white families, the Uncle Tom character who is all too eager to please white society and was seen as the happy ducky, and lastly there was Quimbo, the enforcer a black slave that was shown preferential treatment by whipping or beating other slaves. Stowe created these characters based on what Euro-American society viewed African Americans to resemble, so it is no surprise that a few stories were written to show African Americans in a more positive light.

A Afrofuturism aims to not just focus on the past slavery history of African Americans, but to envision a past that is devoid of such a human atrocity. Before Afrofuturist texts, African Americans were often represented negatively light due to society accepting and not trying to change narratives. Since, “*Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and blackface both relied on impressions of slave culture that profoundly shaped black and white American identities; both were invested in the national tensions that led to the Civil War; and both had liberatory effects even as they seeded American culture with racist stereotypes” (Richards 204). These stereotypes not only vexed African Americans at the time, but also the Caucasians in society. The book proved even more divisive when, “president Abraham Lincoln greeted Stowe at the White House in 1862, he reportedly said, ‘So you’re the little woman who wrote the book that started this great war’” (Richards 204). In the nineteenth-century the reactions towards *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* were often mixed and created further problems for African Americans who sought to be more than a stereotype.

Much like Delany, Stowe’s book started as a series in the weekly periodicals. This shows how the American public were more apt to read a newspaper article, rather than take the time to finish a mass

volume of an entire novel. Much like today, the general public would rather read excerpts and short stories that grasp their attention, rather than mass volumes. By doing so, these short stories tend to resonate within the mind and can be conversationally brought up easier. So, yet again, through Uncle Tom's Cabin, African Americans were thrust into the public view through the lens of biased social stereotypes, rendering them useless or worse, socially invisible. The public view tended to shift from fictional to science fictional as society progressed, as a way of creating a future based on variations of pasts and futures.

### **Emergence of Afrofuturism**

Although there are different races that grace Science Fiction through stories and early films, the characters of color are either portrayed in a negative way or they simply don't have speaking roles. C.L. Moore is one author that sought to change that portrayal through her short story "Shambleau", written in 1933 and debuted in the Science fiction magazine, *Weird Tales*. As one of the first women in Science Fiction, Moore pushed the envelope even further by having a character in her first story be a human Caucasian male. This Caucasian male (Northwest Smith) would usually represent someone in a position of power within a Science Fiction text, yet Moore illustrates how this character will later become helpless and eventually dominated by a brown alien beauty, therefore providing the reader a different view of sex and gender roles within Science Fiction. The depiction of the alien Shambleau, that just so happens to be a, "berry-brown girl in a single tattered garment", provides evidence that when people other than Caucasians are present, they will often represent the savages or villains within Science Fiction (532). Of course, Shambleau inadvertently becomes the protagonist in the story due to her Medusa-like "hair", brown skin, cat-like eyes and the use of mind control that she employs in regard to her victim. The Shambleau alien is used as a lure for the white character Smith, so that Moore can illustrate its true form to unsettle a reader's idea about race, as well as species. By showing the Shambleau as a trickster and as a representation as a person of color, Moore is further validating the fear of how white America had come to the beliefs of how African Americans were stereotypically viewed. This scene is a play on a type of reversal enslavement that is occurring to the character Smith by being at the mercy of a brown alien. In the scene where the Shambleau has taken her true form decided to rape the character Smith in his sleep the audience is now aware of the dangers of the brown-skinned alien. Moore evokes this danger by providing the reader the mental image of "thick pulsating worms clasping every inch" of Smith's body (544). In this scene Smith is now trapped in a tentacle love embrace that is both terrifying and tantalizing. The white character Smith is no longer in charge and has been reduced to being feminized and perhaps sodomized by the Shambleau. This clearly phallic illustration shows that even though the alien is depicted to be female, it can penetrate like male genitalia. For Moore, having the character Smith have his willpower taken away and become submissive to a supposed female alien species, illustrated the gender and power shift of the characters. By evoking a race that happens to be of brown color, Moore is adhering to the negative stereo-typecasting by vilifying the Shambleau character, even though it, "offers a black feminist Afrofuturist epistemology that transgressively revises the contemporary" within the story (Morris, 146). Historically, African Americans as well as many people of color were seen in the 1930s as inferior to Caucasians, but the Shambleau alien is a lure that Moore uses and the true form unsettles ideas about race as well as species. Moore has illustrated a clear Dystopia that included the introduction of a brown species to an otherwise safe mainly white colonial frontier. The dystopic nature of the frontier was due to the colony being inhabited by different races that would cause turmoil. These races were illustrated to coexist through the shared hatred and fear of the Shambleau alien. Although these future frontier societies were written about by African American authors, Science Fiction was often only written by white society to illustrate and establish what white Science Fiction futures were to be represented.

In the novel, *The Invisible Man*, written by Ralph Ellison in 1952, the main character is invisible to a society that refuses to see him. Much like the Shambleau alien in Moore's story, this fictional society does not like the idea of the "Invisible Man" inhabiting within the Euro-American society. One thing to

make clear: “Shambleau” was published in *Weird Tales* and was automatically categorized as Science Fiction, but Ellison’s novel often is not, despite having the same title as an H.G. Wells Science Fiction novel. The narrator of the Ellison’s story is never given a name, but the readers are given enough information to conclude that the “Invisible Man”, is in fact an African American man. This invisible man cannot come to terms as to why society is unable to see him, to the point that he aches to convince himself that he does exist in the real world and that he is part of all the sound and anguish, and that no matter how loudly he screams no one will hear him, since being invisible and without substance will render a human to have a disembodied voice (Ellison 4 & 581). This invisible man is a constant struggle of how he sees himself and how white society sees him, or lack thereof.

In one passage Ellison writes that the invisible man is “constantly being bumped by those of poor vision, or you are simply a phantom in other people’s minds” (4). This introductory passage to the novel, establishes the hopelessness that the main character feels and how easily this fictional society can look through a person that they would rather see as “invisible”. However, throughout the novel the character gains confidence and finds ways to force society to see him. Rather than be defeated, the main character fights on to find his own way to survive in a harsh dystopia. While never using his skin color as the reason why society cannot see him, the invisible man seeks to find a way to belong

By Ellison never giving the protagonist in this novel a name, the protagonist is exemplifying the invisibility that many African American’s felt in the 1950’s, making the story more relatable. Ellison’s protagonist throughout the novel, “is looking for the possibility of a black future that, in the 1930s of the novel, he cannot find”, such as education, employment, and a stable sense of security (Yaszek, *An Afrofuturist Reading*, 304). The protagonist is an African American man who is admitted to an all African American college, later to be kicked out of the prestigious institution, travels to Harlem and comes face-to-face with the harsh realities of white society in the “big city”. While attending college, the invisible man describes himself and his classmates with, “our uniforms pressed, shoes shined, minds laced up, eyes blind like those of robots to visitors and officials on the low, whitewashed reviewing stand” (Ellison 36). The “robots” could potentially represent the African Americans who were willing to perpetrate or become automatons of beings that could easily coexist with the racist society they resided in. This could be done by dressing, speaking and possibly thinking in the ways that society wanted all its citizens to adhere to. Ellison makes the point of letting the reader know that blending into society is easy when you happen to have the preferred color of skin, otherwise, society will not accept you. Ellison posits that the, “goal of the black writer—and all black people—to reorder narrative accounts of the past and present so that audiences may remember them differently without being too tightly bound to them” (Yaszek, *An Afrofuturist Reading*, 303). A simple reordering can be simple as changing how African Americans were treated after slavery was abolished. By reordering the narrative of past and present, Ellison’s novel became an Afrofuturistic text, unbeknownst to him.

In the article titled, “An Afrofuturist Reading of Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*”, Lisa Yaszek writes that, “Ellison tries to rethink reality—and to rethink the histories we tell ourselves to make sense of reality—by subjecting his unnamed protagonist (and, by extension, his readers) to a sometimes-dizzying array of times, places, and events that do not necessarily unfold in a linear manner” throughout the novel (Yaszek 298). In the passage where the invisible man learns that his letter of recommendation is a ruse, Ellison achieves the rethought of history. The invisible man is seeking employment after being kicked out of the university and is trying to earn money to return and finish his education. A version of this fictional tale could have happened to an African American in the past, but rather than turn to violence or revenge, Ellison writes that the invisible man seeks to just coexist without causing any waves. Later when the invisible man is thinks to himself that rather than fighting, “he was trained to accept the foolishness...pretend you respect them and acknowledge in then the same quality of authority...make no effort to fight back, but only to escape unmarked” (225). This mantra of sorts is throughout the novel, and is believed by the invisible man. It is now claimed to be an Afrofuturist text due to its imagining of a how the invisible man can disappear and reappear into society to form his own person and control his fate.

Later in 1967, through another Science Fiction text, the Euro-American author Harlan Ellison approaches the ideas of gender and race in his short story, “I Have No Mouth and I Must Scream”. One

important change is there is are characters of different races within this story. In all others previously discussed, most, if not all the characters were of European descent. Ellison writes in a very blunt way that is not without its slight racist undertones. Again, there is a main Caucasian male character named Ted, who is the focus of the short story. Ted is the narrator of the short story and through his words, he cannot be trusted. All the characters are slightly insane, but Ted insists that the other characters hate him because he was the, “only one still sane and whole” (Ellison 31). Ellison writes the character Ted in this manner, to show the reader that Ted is delusional to consider that everyone around him is insane, but he is somehow normal. Ted is a man, and being such, he is put in a position of control throughout the short story due to his underlying white superiority complex.

The female character Ellen is represented as a promiscuous female that is helpless without the protection of the men around her. At one point in the story, Ellen is being carried by two other male characters so that she would be safe. Ellen is represented as a weak female that only had a concern for sex and being overly emotional. Later in the story the reader is let on to the fact that Ellen is an African American woman when Ellison references her as having, a face that was, “black against the snow” along with having “ebony features stark against the snow” that surrounded them (Ellison 40). The portrayal of Ellen as an African American introduces the reader to a glimpse as to why Afrofuturism was created within Science Fiction: to alter how African Americans were characterized. Although Ellison does introduce an African American female in his story, the fact that she is portrayed a promiscuous and weak woman, is still a low blow towards what the future holds for African Americans in futuristic worlds.

Afrofuturist artists demonstrate how black alienation exacerbated the visions of the future and by challenging the transformation of these future fantastic stories (Yaszek, Afrofuturism, 48). Ellen is portrayed as a weak black woman, who in the end of the story, with the assistance of a male, realizes Ted’s plan and, “even as the fear gripped her” she kills one of her companions (Ellison 40). The portrayal of women as weak seems to be somewhat of a trend in Science Fiction, but the combination of being a woman and a different ethnicity spells out disaster for said character. Within the emergence of early Afrofuturism, there are little to no female characters. This was due to the lack of female Science Fiction writers as well as, those writers that could imagine an African American woman as anything other than alien or inferior. It was not until the creations of characters that came forth from the imagination of Octavia Butler, Nalo Hopkinson and the like, did Afrofuturism begin to feature more female characters.

### **Films, Television, and Afrofuturism**

Many Science Fiction films can now be linked to Afrofuturism in one way or another. Having an African American character that is represented within the film can be interpreted in many ways. In the past, African American actors were used as parts of the scenery, stereotyped characters, or having a non-speaking role. As the emergence of more Science fiction films began, so did the diversity of the casts. Focusing on the middle of the 20th century to the present, there have been films produced that show how an influence Afrofuturism is received at the box office. The small representation of people of color shows how Hollywood Science Fiction disregards the impact that other races would have in a Science Fictional future and shows that, “the limits on the imaginary are largely self-imposed” (Russell 213). To counterbalance the racial inequality, Science fiction dove into the other side of the creativity pool and decided to represent people of color as animals.

Science Fiction took this dive into the reversal of human and animal relations, but not without its racial undertones of course. Within the film *Planet of the Apes*, directed by Franklin Schaffner in 1968, we see how the world per Science Fiction would change if the human and simian roles were reversed. An astronaut crew manages to time travel and crash-land on an unknown planet, that is later discovered to be earth in the year of 3978. In this film the all humans are now the savages, whilst the simians are the civilized society. Schaffner draws on the comparative method that Darwin endorsed in the early 19th century, by having the humans become the, “supposedly lower races represented [at] the savage stage of universal development” (Sharp, 41). By doing this, Schaffner allowed the viewer to imagine that as

humans we will all die as one or survive, regardless of color. In one scene, the humans are herded into cages like wild animals while wearing only scraps of tattered clothing and makeshift loincloths. This scene is eerily familiar to how African Americans are usually represented in Science Fiction films. The humans in the film have no spoken or written language due to, “man having no understanding or the mental capacity” with the exception to the astronaut Colonel George Taylor is given the nickname of “Bright Eyes-Taylor” by his simian captors (Planet of the Apes). Within the film, there is one African American character (Dodge), who is shot and killed less than thirty minutes into the film, and later in the film the simians explain his untimely demise to “Bright-Eyes Taylor” by stating, “Oh, yes. There was one who ... somehow ... died before we found out he could talk. He possessed a unique skin. We had it stuffed and put in our museum...It was black.” (Planet of the Apes).

In this scene, we see that there is a hierarchy of simians: the lighter complexion orangutans are the politicians and lead doctors, the brown chimpanzees are the scientists and the brute security are the black gorillas. Schaffner established a hierarchy of skin tone, much like those that are prevalent in society of the 1960s. Schaffner reversed the American historical relationship between African Americans and whites within the film. White humans became the slaves in the film, whilst the black/brown simians represented the masters of Earth. In this scene, we see that the darkest of the simians are the most aggressive and loud. These gorillas are the ones that have shot, tied up and chased down the harmless Caucasian characters. By having a racist analogy comparing African Americans to apes, Schaffner showed the derogatory association that not only vilified African American representation within Science Fiction, but it increased the fears Caucasians had regarding the over population of African Americans that would eventually lead to a complete takeover of the planet (Russell, 203). Later in Science Fiction Films, there would be a chance for African Americans to have pivotal roles that would help break the stereotypes that were being thrust into Hollywood Science Fiction

The film *The Matrix* directed by the Wachowski siblings in 1999, shows a postapocalyptic world. This Human civilization is being destroyed by a computer system known as the Matrix. This destruction is done in a smoke and mirrors type of way, being that the humans that reside within the Matrix, do not know it is happening. The Matrix was simply a, “mood altered reality, due to neural interactive simulation, in order to keep humans pacified and used for energy”, so that the sentient computers could continue to survive (*The Matrix*). Within the film, humanity has survived in this state for almost two hundred years. In a sense, the computer programs thrust the humans to live in the matrix to ensure the overall sense of security and ignorance.

The film follows the typical story of a hero, who goes through obstacles, and saves the day at the last minute. However, this would not occur if the hero hadn't been coached and guided by a few pivotal characters. The first character that the audience is introduced to is Trinity, a Caucasian woman who is not to be trifled with. Trinity is of a slim build, has what could be considered a masculine haircut and is wearing latex pants and tank top. In the opening scene with Trinity, the lighting envelops a room in a drab green hue and the only light emitted is from the flashlights that are mounted atop police rifles. The idea that a woman can be strong is brought to question when the sentient agents arrive to the scene and the police officers tell them that Trinity is just “one woman” so the issue will be handled quickly. Although Trinity is a slim woman, the audience is shown that she has a very powerful combat knowledge and swiftly kills all the police officers in the room. This is an example of how as a society, we have become so accustomed to the stereotype that women are weaker than men and in need of being controlled by them. The Wachowski siblings make a point to show that although a woman may be small in stature, due to men underestimating her strength, she can use this to her advantage. By opening the film with a strong female lead, the Wachowski siblings provide the audience with the idea, that reality outside of the matrix understands the power of woman kind.

Throughout the film, Trinity is always in pants and never in a dress, as a way to illustrate that she is a fighter and on the same level as her male counterparts. Even in her pants, Trinity is still sexualized due to the tightness of the pants and the fact that she is constantly wearing high heeled boots. This is a subtle way that the character has been sexualized and shown to have a feminine side. Throughout the film, Trinity is shown to be more emotional than her male shipmates, by speaking aloud how she feels and

admitting her love for the lead character. The argument isn't that Trinity is being stereotyped as a damsel in distress, but it is clear that the character is being portrayed in a way that is showing her to be desirable, as no other character is.

The second pivotal character is Morpheus, an African American captain of a space shuttle that will also become the lead characters' teacher and friend. Morpheus is the person who brings our hero Neo into the matrix and acts as his guide to learn his purpose and fight against the sentient beings that threaten to destroy those who would oppose their computer-generated used to keep humans calm and under control. Morpheus states that all humans are slaves, who are born into bondage, born into a prison that humans cannot smell, taste, or touch. In the matrix, humans are prisoners of their own mind (The Matrix). This idea that humans must free their mind in order to recognize the oppression they are being subjected to, "is an Afrofuturist setting, where Morpheus expresses the need for the African American community to wake up", and realize how society is treating them (Elia 90). It could be argued that the character is speaking to all of society and not just the African American community, being that everyone that resides on the space ship are treated equally and fairly.

There is no doubt that the directors of *The Matrix* created the character Morpheus to guide Neo through his journey as a way parallel the Greek God of dreams and sleep, who is also named Morpheus. By making this character African American, the directors allowed the character to be seen as something other than a stereotype. What is worth pointing out, is that Morpheus is an African American character who is constantly talking about the absolute freedom that could be obtained once the Matrix is destroyed, though slavery in this fictional Earth would have taken place more than three hundred years ago. Although, the Matrix shows that "both the science-fiction movie and the scenario are examples of cybernetic futurism that talks of things that haven't happened yet in the past tense", Afrofuturism sought out a way to do the same for people of color. In a way slavery hasn't happened in this fictional matrix world, and yet the character, named after the God of dreams and sleep, may have another reason for wanting freedom so badly.

The last pivotal character that helps the main character Neo on his journey to becoming who he is destined to be, was the Oracle. The character of the Oracle is portrayed by an African American female, who gives Neo the prophecy of his future within the Matrix. The audience is first introduced to the Oracle as she is in the kitchen with an apron on and baking cookies. Immediately the audience can parallel this character with the romanticized mammy house slave archetype, due to similar dress and mannerisms. The mammy in the era of slavery, was an elderly African American woman that was a type of surrogate mother to the Caucasian master's children, as well as being a domestic worker. With all the responsibility, the mammy, much like the Oracle, had no power over their own fate. The role of the Oracle is to tell the person their future or destiny, so that the individual could, "experience and propose counter-histories that reconsider the role of [the individual] in society in the past and imagine alternative roles in the future" (Elia 84). By doing this, the Oracle is opening an individual's mind to various possibilities and newer futures, much like Afrofuturism seeks to imagine a type of utopic possible future. The Oracle in *The Matrix* tells Neo of his fate and leaves it up to him, whether he would accept her knowledge or not. Although the Oracle is seen as a powerful and all-knowing person, she is in fact helpless to what the Matrix could do to her. The Oracle would appear to represent another African American character that is placed within the Matrix, in order to help the hero, succeed in his journey. But upon further inspection, one can conclude that *The Matrix* is mirroring past histories and hoping to alter the fictional future.

The Matrix generated world is a clear example of what life is like in a dystopian society. The humans are unaware of the dangers around them and those who are aware can choose to fight or take a pill that will make them forget that they are in any form of danger. This type of science and technology only benefits the computers and those who embrace them. Although a dystopia, *The Matrix* shows non-white people as the potential saviors of the world as we know it. Race seems non-existent in this future war story. Through embracing that humans are a general race and that the computers are an alien race, *The Matrix* invites the audience to challenge the thought that race has no place in the future. To embrace the absence of racism displayed in a future world shows that however dystopic it may be, it is still more tolerable than the world that we currently reside in.

Through early representations of Science Fiction, technology and innovation is male dominated and they are seen as the most competent, while women seem to fall by the wayside. The race of choice that is mainly represented in Science Fiction is white, although there are a few minor characters that represent other races throughout the stories. One of the ongoing themes throughout early Science Fiction is that no matter where in space or time, women are always controlled by their emotions and are seen as the weaker sex. In comparison to the gender roles that are prevalent in Science Fiction, there is also the issue of racism. Gradually Science Fiction, such as *The Matrix*, shows that films are embracing the image of a multiracial future and once it is fully embraced, Science Fiction will become even more of a staple in different forms of media. It is not without taking one step forward into a multiracial future, does Science Fiction take two steps back, to provide said future with blatant racism towards those who do not fit into the fictional norms and negative stereotypes.

Within the Star Wars universe ranging from 1977 to present, there seems to be the idea that the planets that are primarily inhabited by a single race are Utopias. Each planet that was inhabited by several species and races, were the ones that most of the fighting occurred. Using the Cold War context is a way to view some of these Utopias as anything other than a political issue or to view these Utopias in a positive light is impossible since within a Utopia there are various horrors of communism and a hive mindset that will lead to a dysfunctional Utopia (Jameson, xi). The Empire within the Star Wars story arc was a representation of a Cold War image of socialist Dystopia, a totalitarian government that was a negative representation, whilst the Republic had some Utopian elements due to the fact that most of the protagonists existed within the Republic. Within the different types of Utopia, there could be socialist ones that would result in a realization of the underrepresentation of other cultures that are blatantly missing from Utopian texts as of now (Jameson, xi). These socialist Utopias were similar to the Republic and the Separatists that were in control of the galaxy in Star Wars. Jameson along with Darko Suvin reference the early 1950s, discuss the principle idea of cognitive estrangement when describing, “Utopia to be a socio-economic subgenre” of Science Fiction (Jameson, xiv). Simply put, cognitive estrangement is taking something that is familiar and managing to make it strange. By Star Wars providing a thriving society that has aliens and humans intermingling together, this created the idea of the Utopian form of cognitive estrangement. Jameson and Suvin both agree that this is what is valuable and necessary when creating a Utopia.

The film, *Star Wars Episode I: The Phantom Menace*, directed by George Lucas in 2001, introduced the character Jar Jar Binks, whose voice and motion-captured movements were provided by an African American actor. This character is one of the most obvious illustrations of racism through an alien species, from his prominent lips, slouched demeanor, and his slow lumbering “pimp” walk. Jar Jar Binks is characterized throughout the film as having, “eccentricities in his behavior, dress, and speech” (Wagner 41). In this film, there is a planet Naboo that is inhabited by two races: the cultured humans who have an operating government, technology and are obviously superior. The other race represented is the one that birthed Jar Jar Binks: they are the Gungans, the underground reptilian dwelling species that remained close to their center of creation, who are unintelligent with no understanding of technology.

Lucas first introduces Jar Jar, in a scene where the character is running from some unknown pursuer through a dense forest in Naboo. Jar Jar is dressed tattered and torn brown clothing, in contrast to the green trees and grass that surround him. The dense forest that Jar Jar is frightfully running through is eerily similar to the lush green forests that are located in the United States southern regions. Jar Jar, with his personification of an African American male, is fleeing from what could be presumed as his white captors. The entire scene could easily be a representation of what a runaway slave would be look like in the 1800s.

As Jar Jar is haphazardly running through the forest, he collides with the Jedi character Qui-Gon Jinn, as they both narrowly escape being crushed by a hovering space craft that is crushing everything within its path, thanks to Qui-Gon’s quick reflexes and fast thinking.

*Qui-Gon: You Almost got us killed! Are you brainless?*

*Jar Jar: I spake!*

*Qui-Gon: The ability to speak does not make you intelligent.*

Lucas creates the character Qui-Gon to represent sensibility, power and knowledge. By having Jar Jar use a type of ignorant colloquialism when he encounters Qui-Gon, sets the premise that Jar Jar is the lesser or the two. It is within this scene that Lucas shows the hierarchal breakdown amongst human and alien. After this brief interaction, Jar Jar takes his white hero Qui-Gon Jinn to an underwater Gungan city as a way of showing his gratitude for being rescued from death. In this scene, there is a political debate amongst the Gungan “bosses” that is settled by arguing very loudly and the occasional raspberry. The way that the Gungans who are supposedly in charge of the decision making are acting, illustrates how savage this species is. Jar Jar is merely comically inept and his people are civilized, but just barely. Here Lucas represents that the minority race of Naboo is somewhat organized, but still inferior to the humans. For the Gungan people, wars are fought by slingshot, since human technology is apparently too complicated. This child-like race that is a clear parallel to the representation of African Americans in this film, seem to need the superior Naboo to help them become civilized. Here we see that Lucas is pointing out the obvious differences of the two races on the planet Naboo, so that the audience is led to believe that inferior races were those who were anything but white Europeans, but in this case the film substitutes the European for the Naboo.

Jar Jar Binks is an idiotic character that was thrust into the limelight with a clear representation of a Sambo-like vernacular that is a barely understandable form of English that could not have been mistaken as to represent African Americans in some sort of Science Fiction minstrel show by saying lines like, “Mesa called Jar Jar Binks. Mesa your humble servant” and “Yoosa should follow me now, okeeday” (Episode I). A “sambo” is what an African American person was called if he resembled a, “traditional plantation negro, who was always foolish lazy and careless”, who was incapable of living as an adult, without the guiding hand of a white man (Wagner 44). A Minstrel Show is one that was, constituted as entertainment as early as 1769. These shows, “whose base is Negro folk art, either comic or lachrymose, plagiarized, staged, and frequently falsified by low grade white actors who ‘played Negros’ by blackening their faces with burnt cork” (Wagner 40). By having a character portrayed as what was once a way to make light of and find humor in regards to the persecutions that African Americans endured, was an obvious way of showing that the negative stereotypes have manifested into fictional characters that are obviously meant to represent African Americans.

The way that Lucas created Jar Jar’s speech, was a way of making the character appear as an idiotic moron that would be nothing but a burden to those who encountered him. The way that Jar Jar spoke is more like a child that has just learned how to frame a single thought and form incomplete sentences. This portrayal of Jar Jar as an obvious minstrel character, invites the, “dissemination and the authentication of the mythical portrait which is deeply rooted in the American popular tradition” to become popularized once more (Wagner 48). Through this representation, African Americans were characterized and illustrated to be ignorant and childlike in opposition to the superior educated Caucasian counterparts in the film. African Americans were not the only race that was personified through an alien species. In this introductory scene, the director shows the viewer how in fact “science fiction serves as a useful medium through which to observe how a culture’s obsession with race is reproduced and its racial hierarchies projected” (Russell 194). Jar Jar Binks was the perfect example of racial stereotyping that paved the way for introduction of other characters that would negatively represent other races. These characters are a reminder of just how negative people of color are viewed in Hollywood Science Fiction and how little society cares about that fact. Later the Star Wars franchise would seek to resolve the problem through the introduction of characters that were various races in the newer computer animated series. By Star Wars seeking to resolve the problem, it tried to address the limitations of characters of various races of earlier Science Fiction films.

Many Science Fiction films since the Star Wars franchise emerged, have slightly increased the inclusion of characters that are portrayed by African Americans as well as Black people from various

countries throughout the world. Even with the slight increase, there have still been some backlash when feature films employ African American/Black talent, and yet these actors are not seen in their physical form. This is due to, “nonwhites in general and blacks in particular [remaining] invisible to western cinematic science fiction, if somewhat less so to its literary counterpart which occasionally has featured black characters” (Russel 193). These actors are often in computer-generated imagery (CGI) to represent monsters, aliens or simply an “other”, in regards to the human species. Within the Science Fiction genre, there has been a failure or in a sense some form of refusal to imagine African American actors in roles that would actively challenge the existing stereotypes of African Americans (Russel 193). One such film that was highly successful and guilty of masking its colored actors was the Science Fiction blockbuster, *Avatar*, directed by James Cameron in 2010.

The story of the *Avatar* film takes place in the year of 2154 on a jungle-like planet named Pandora. Humanity has sought to colonize the planet due to Earth having been depleted of its natural resources. In the film the alien species are called the Na’vi and are nine-foot-tall, cat-like, and blue. The plot of the *Avatar* film parallels with the historical ways that Europeans sought out new countries to colonize for their resources, such as parts of the jungles in the African Congo. The idea that there is a historical parallel is strengthened throughout the film with glimpses of the scenery, tribal dress and the Na’vi language. The Na’vi people speak in a dialect that could be easily mistaken for a mixture of the Khoisan and Bantu language that is spoken countries throughout present day Africa, with its distinctive click consonants. Science fiction is, “deeply enmeshed in the historical moment in which it is conceived, gestated and produced” (Russel 192). Simply put, Science Fiction much like Afrofuturism, seeks to retell histories and future histories from the perspective of the creator’s imagination. It just so happens that the *Avatar* shows the Caucasian actors in the foreground, whilst the African American actors, “provide the voices and performance captured movements for the film’s computer-generated aliens”, thus rendered absent and in the unseen background throughout the film (Russel 194). By having African American actors not visible, there is an exclusion of people of color throughout the film, thus resulting in why Afrofuturism has been created. This exclusion of African American visibility, creates an alien world in which humans have inhabited, with the majority of humanity being melanin deficient.

Fetishism, Stuart Hall reminds us, is “a realm where fantasy intervenes in representation,” and that comprises “the substitution of an ‘object’ for some dangerous and powerful but forbidden force” (Hall 266). The Na’vi people within the film are fetishized since they are the taboo and unknown, but not necessarily in a sexual sense. This is due to the obsession that the humans have towards wanting to become a being other than human. The main narrative of the *Avatar* is the theme of displacement, and this is taken quite literally. In one scene, the humans seek to displace the Na’vi people by, “sending a message...that they can take whatever they want” (*Avatar*) as the military seek out the natural resource on Pandora and are wiping out an ecology, as well as a huge portion of the Na’vi for personal gain and wealth. The utopia of the planet Pandora is quickly turned into a Dystopia, with the introduction of humans and technology. To disregard the ramifications that would occur to the Na’vi or Pandora if the “unobtainium” natural resource is removed provides evidence that, “to be more precise, Science Fiction is neither forward-looking nor utopian” (Eshun 290). Just by that premise alone, the focus of Science Fiction is in opposition as to what Afrofuturism aims to achieve.

The film introduces the main characters as a paraplegic marine named Jake Sully, who inhabits an avatar that resembles the Na’vi and a Na’vi female, named Neytiri Te Tskaha Mo’at’ite, who is the Chief’s daughter of the Omatikaya clan on Pandora. These two characters’ contrast not only because one is a Caucasian white human (played by Sam Worthington) and the other is a blue Na’vi alien, but because the actress who is within the computer-generated imagery is an Afro-Latina (played by Zoe Saldana). Due to the habitual nature of films to mask African American characters, it is not surprising that all the main Na’vi characters are portrayed by actors of African descent. By placing humans inside of a Na’vi avatar, this provides the audience with the idea, that in order for humanity to empathize with an alien other, humans must transform themselves mentally and physically. The “blueface” of the Na’vi avatar is no different that the black face that was painted on many years ago during the minstrel shows, resulting in a form of didactic blackface. Didactic blackface refers to, “a rhetorical style of racial mimesis whose

objective is not simply to entertain but to forge a social critique, which is premised on the belief<sup>7</sup>, that in order to fully understand the other one must become (temporarily) the other (Russel 207). Within the film, the tragic mulatto can be paralleled to Jake Sully, as he is attempting to pass as a Na'vi in order to understand the Na'vi experience. This form of didactic "blueface", was implemented in order for Jake Sully to, "learn these savages from the inside, gain their trust, and how to force cooperation" (Avatar). Although the color of skin has been changed from black to blue, "the template of the otherness remains grounded in contemporary racial representation" (Russel 211). Cameron has made a major blockbuster film, using the age-old story of Pocahontas, with the exception that the Native Americans are now blue aliens and John Smith is a marine. This is exactly one of the reasons that Afrofuturism was created, to provide African Americans a Science Fictional reality, in which they are represented by those who are African American.

Cameron invites the audience to explore the idea that the Avatar is a film about the colonization of Pandora and how the character Jake Sully suffers from a type of "white savior" complex in regards to Na'vi within the film and how the Na'vi are in a sense, the "white man's burden" or sometimes even the "white man's nemesis". The "white savior" complex occurs when the humans inhabit Pandora and teach the native people English and the human way of living, to save them from their savage ways. The "white man's burden" occurs when the humans infantilize the Na'vi people as if this alien species hasn't been surviving on its own, without outside help of the human race. And finally, the Na'vi become the "white man's nemesis" when they do not comply with the demands of the humans and decide to fight back for their land to avoid colonization. From the perspective of the Na'vi people, the character Jake Sully is often juvenile, "stupid, ignorant and like a baby" in his actions, but is deemed the superior species simply because the humans believe themselves to be as such (Avatar). On the other hand, the character Neytiri is very stoic, but is yet depicted as a savage, due to her loin cloth, braided hair and lack of covering garments. More than once the films' Caucasian characters refer to the Na'vi people as, "blue monkeys and fly-bitten savages" (Avatar). The question arises that if James Cameron had created an Avatar film with a planet where the inhabitants were black and not blue, would the film have been successful? There may have been an outcry of blatant racism if the Na'vi were black aliens and still, "evoked a nonwhite otherness and stereotypes associated with it (primitivism, noble savagery, ecological utopianism)", rather than being seen as cyanskinned "others" (Russel 213). If the film had been one with an Afrofuturistic theme, would it have been as successful? Of course, these questions can only be answered in time as more Science Fiction films are created.

There is a clear struggle for African American representation in film, but it goes deeper than simply hiring and casting these actors in the roles. There must be a change in regards to how these actors are cast into stereotypical roles that are deleterious to the African America psyche. In the recent Ghostbusters reboot in 2016, there is four lead female characters and one who happens to be African American. While the other three Euro-American characters are physics researchers and engineers, the African American character is a blue-collar MTA (Metropolitan Transportation Authority) worker. To see that three Euro-American women can succeed and become scientists, while the African American woman is a laborer, is quite infuriating cinematically speaking. The character Patty Tolan, played by a comedic actress Leslie Jones, is represented as the stereotypical loud and god fearing woman. While the other characters may tackle the issues with the supernatural with logic, the character Patty tends to yell phrases such as, "Ah hell naw, the Devil is a liar! Get out of my friend, ghost! The power of Patty compels you!" (Ghostbusters). This is a clear misquote that many church going African Americans say in regards to someone or something getting in the way, that is presumed to be evil. It is understood the entire film is in fact a comedy, but it appears the writers had all the stereotypical black jokes reserved for the character of Patty. None of the other EuroAmerican characters were overly loud, borderline obnoxious and threw in religious connotations. This is due to the film and television industries social institution, that is composed of four elements. These elements are, "industrial concerns (advertisers and economic components), regulatory concerns (legal decisions and federal policies), textual concerns (advertising texts) and audience concerns (public conception and viewer activism)" (Boyd 165). None of these elements take into concern the negative or sometimes racist stereotypes that are being viewed, what is taken into

concern, is the profitability of these films or images. So even though the character of Patty is a slap in the face to some African Americans, it could be said that Leslie Jones could quote the words of Hattie McDaniel who was the first African American woman to receive an Academy Award who stated that she would “rather play a maid than be a maid”.

### **Literature, Contemporary Comics, and Afrofuturism**

In a post-apocalyptic future narrative written in 1987, the African American female Science Fiction author Octavia Butler introduced the reader to a strong female character and the existence of extraterrestrials who are both saviors and captors, that have harvested the last remaining human survivors from an uninhabitable Earth, due to a nuclear war. Octavia Butler wasn't necessarily a strict Afrofuturist writer due to her stories involving fictional communities that were multi-ethnic and multi-species. In *Dawn: Xenogenesis*, the protagonist Lilith Iyapo, an African American female, is awakened 250 years after the nuclear wars. Lilith is a complex, defiant and intelligent woman, who to the surprise of the alien captors (the Oankali and the Ooloi), is not as easily controlled. In this post-apocalyptic future, humans have been saved, but only to become a host for hybrid offspring.

By having the main character be an African American female, who is faced with the dilemma of having to mate and convince other humans to mate with an alien species, or to become extinct, “Butler explores the appropriation of black labor in the name of national or global progress” (Yaszek 301). This neo-slave narrative is much like the history of the Africans that were brought as slaves to America. The most telling part of *Dawn* comes when Lilith learns that her body's reproductive organs have been tampered with. Up to this point, the alien captors have told Lilith that her body was healed of cancer and diseases. It is not until she is almost raped, and told that pregnancy was impossible, that it is discovered that her reproductive organs have been altered. The only explanation that is given by the alien captor is that, “your people called it birth control. You are slightly changed. It was done while you slept, as it was done to all humans at first. It will be undone eventually” (Butler 96). This type of control over the human body without permission of its owner can be seen as a violation of trust and freedom, in which Lilith has none. The notion of reproductive freedom has been stripped from the humans that were “rescued” from Earth, thus rendering them slaves to their alien captors. Lilith's free will is taken from her, as she is forced to accept and create a unique path to the future, or die in the attempt to resist the inevitable (Verharen 200). This strong female character is still weakened by alien others, who resemble what would closely be called a male and who are also, gender-fluid.

The irrational xenophobia that the humans in *Dawn* have towards their alien Oankali captors, parallels the ways that African Americans have been treated in the past. Perhaps the Oankali chose Lilith to be a leader of the captive humans since African Americans were, “the only group in America that was enslaved by its neighbors, and as the target of most negative images in society, [Lilith] should be peculiarly equipped to point a nation to humanistic goals” (Verharen 201). However, later it is found out that the Oankali have destroyed most of the historical artifacts of human society, and the ones that were kept are not allowed to be read by humans, when Lilith is told, “none of your people are permitted to see them”, so that humanity can be reborn (Butler 60). Much like slavery, the captive humans are forced to live as their captors see fit. Sadly, Lilith's succumbs to what could be considered a futuristic Uncle Tom stereotype, by coming to terms that she will always have to obey the Oankali in one way or another, while remaining aware of her status as a captive. What was once a strong willed African American female, becomes unwillingly subservient to the Oankali captors. In the end of the story, Lilith is now pregnant and vows to teach the humans she encounters to, “Learn and run! If she were lost, others did not have to be. Humanity did not have to be” (Butler 248). These last lines of the book assure that Afrofuturist writers will always fight the dystopic futures of humanity, it may just take time to do so.

The African American imaginaries opened a Pandora's Box as to what Afrofuturism could encompass. For instance, *Midnight Robber* (2000), written by Nalo Hopkinson, is set in a future where an Afro-Caribbean population has colonized planets throughout the universe. In the past the Caribbean has

been thought of as a sort of second-world country due to it still developing the technologies that the United States has. Hopkinson has managed to write about a future where Afro-Caribbean's have become the interstellar colonizers as opposed to the colonized. Leif Sorensen writes in, "Dubwise into the Future: Versioning Modernity in Nalo Hopkinson", that, "Hopkinson revises science fiction's model for producing futurity by making the Caribbean, a postcolonial space frequently described in terms of its incomplete, partial, or deficient modernity, central to her imagination of fractured and contradictory future worlds and by using Caribbean popular culture to build these worlds" (Sorensen 270). By creating a Caribbean Afrofuturistic future, Hopkinson is allowing Science Fiction readers to challenge the notion that advancements technology is possible in non-Eurocentric countries.

Hopkinson writes the story in way that alienates American readers by narrating in a Patwa way of speaking, where English, Creole and Spanish are intermingled within the dialogue between the characters. This challenges the reader to become accustomed to an Afro-Caribbean way of speaking, whereas the reader is used to seeing sentences written as, "Yes, I love to watch a woman nap", where instead, Hopkinson writes, "what a thing to love a woman, taking a siesta, oui" (4-5). The main character in this novel is Tan-Tan Habib, a young Afro-Caribbean girl who is forced to flee from the, "civilized" world of Toussaint to the "rough" world of New Half-Way Tree due to the crimes of her father. These two worlds are linked and kept apart by the dimension veil that could represent the uncivilized past and the future that technology brings. Hopkinson describes New Half Way Tree as, "the place for restless people...where the mongoose still run wild, and the mako jumbie bird does still stalk through the bush, head higher than any house" ( Hopkinson 2). In this passage, Hopkinson paints the pictures that the New half-way Tree is an almost prehistoric place, with its wild animals and birds the size of a house. Residing in New Half-Way Tree, Tan-Tan lives a hard life as she matures, by being constantly beaten and raped by her father. On her sixteenth birthday, a pregnant Tan-Tan kills her father and flees into the bushlands. Through her strength and determination to survive and protect those around her, Tan-Tan becomes the living embodiment of the "Midnight Robber". By becoming the Midnight Robber, Tan-Tan is experiencing a type of double consciousness due to her, "structural and psychological alienation" (Eshun 298). This personification of a hero, helps Tan-Tan become a strong survivor and living myth within the novel. Hopkinson uses past histories to develop and reimagine future histories for AfroCaribbean people, one in which technological advances are in the forefront of their culture. When it comes to equality throughout Science fiction, technology is seen as something that will advance humanity and separate the civilized from the savage others.

The idea of otherness, survival, and knowledge is a continuing theme within Afrofuturism. The story of Binti (2015), written by Nnedi Okorafor, follows the main character, who is a sixteen-year-old African girl named Binti who has left her Himba village on Earth for the first time, so that she may study at the Oomza University in hopes of changing her villages beliefs that, "race, science, and technology" should remain small and private (Yaszek, Afrofuturism, 301). Binti is thrust into a new world full of technology and she is the only Himba at the university. The character is asked upon arrival why she is covered in clay and wearing heavy jewelry, while being "stared at like a rare bizarre butterfly" (Okorafor 21). Although most Science Fiction texts tend to deal with how someone like Binti, "is going to contend with these alienating circumstances", within this Afrofuturist text, similar interests like math, invention, and learning, allow the character to form relationships with her classmates (Eshun 298).

Aboard the ship to the Oomza university, Binti and the rest of the students are attacked by aliens referred to as the Meduse, "blue and translucent, except for one of its tentacles, which was tinted pink" who have rippling domes for a head (30). This imagery is of an alien jellyfish that happens to breathe gas. Everyone aboard the ship are killed by the Meduse except for Binti, due to the Meduse not being able to touch her while she is holding a piece of ancient technology called an edan which, "a piece of old old technology; she called it a god stone", without dying themselves (62). This technology not only protects Binti, but it also enables her to communicate with the Meduse. Surprisingly the two species have dialogue and the Meduse plot is revealed, through the calm urging of Binti, and without further violence.

Okorafor's book is one of interspecies connection and cultures that are mythological such as the Meduse and the Himba people. Both species thought the other as primitive, until dialogue was exchanged.

The African people of Earth were neither primitive or racist. That alone is vastly different than most Science Fiction texts that are insistent upon war, superiority and colonialization. Within this Afrofuturist text, there was a connection of understanding and a sense of a global village. Like Hopkinson, Okorafor uses imagery from existing African cultures within her text. The Himba people in *Binti* are illustrated the same way that the Himba people who reside in northwest Africa, detailed by the, “mostly clay and oil” *otijze* that *Binti* rubs on her skin and hair throughout the story. Okorafor does not shy away from the nomadic simplicity of the Himba people within the story, yet she invites the reader to understand that nomadic doesn’t not necessarily mean primitive or savage. By having women of color as the main character, rather than secondary characters, these authors prove that women are as valuable as their male counterparts.

Within contemporary comics, most of the Euro-American authors represent African American women as secondary characters that are easily controlled. One example of female empowerment and the attempt to break the stereotype of women in Science Fiction in *Uncanny X-Men* (1980) series is, “The Dark Phoenix Saga” through the character Jean Grey. Although some sort of nuclear event happened that lead to the creation of mutants worldwide, that is not discussed in this comic. *Uncanny X-Men* invites the audience to see the dangers of what happens when a female is given the greatest mutant power. The graphic novel does this through the character Jean Grey. *Uncanny X-Men* introduces Jean as she is hallucinating about a past history that she doesn’t recall living. Within this hallucination, the other female character Storm (Ororo Munroe) is depicted as a house slave, to which Jean proclaims, “Silence! You dare speak to me slave?! I am not your friend—but your Mistress! I own you!” (*Uncanny X-Men*). This emotional outburst causes Jean to become violent and slaps Storm in the face. What stands out about this scene, is that Storm is one of the most prominent *X-Men* characters. For this series to depict her as a slave, shows that when compared to her Caucasian counterparts, she will always be seen as less than, due to her African ancestry. Just this narration alone is a strong enough reason to justify why Afrofuturism is need within contemporary comics. There are plenty of contemporary *X-Men* comics that have the story arc of its African/African American characters, but what is needed is inclusive plot without racist undertones.

Taking race out of the equation, there is still a constant theme that women in comics are always quick to lose control of their actions, minds, and emotions. In *Uncanny X-Men*, Jean is being comforted by a male to help her control her emotions and her inner hysteria. The character Jean is a telepathic mutant that can read other mutants and humans thoughts. But soon it is revealed that although a telepath herself, Jean succumbs to a more powerful telepath, a male telepath. Seemingly a helpless damsel, Jean is then thrust into the most epic form of mind control. Through the struggle to free herself from the control of a man, Jean also frees the darkness within her known as the Phoenix. The Phoenix represents the hysterical nature of what a female with unlimited power can become. Although stronger in mind, Jean is still weak physically in omparison to her male counterparts. Within this Marvel series, a woman is given power over other, but due to her weakened emotional state, she is unable to wield and ultimately loses control. Marvel and its mostly male writers, seem to give every mutant character a weakness, although the female mutants have the tendency to easily succumb to theirs.

Many contemporary comics are starting to create female lead characters that are strong, complex, and women of color. Recently, *Niobe: She is Life*, created by the Afrofuturist author Sebastian Jones in 2016, features a brown-skinned half elf and half wild elf warrior, who is on a journey of self-discovery to find out all the powerful things she is capable of. This character is not drawn in the usual overly sexualized fashion that contemporary comics are known for. Jones has created a unique brown-skinned character, who has dreadlocks and a distinct heterochromia in her eyes. There is something ethereal and natural in the artwork. Not once is the character asking for the assistance of a male and when the character fails, she overcomes her obstacles without becoming emotional.

*Niobe* is a good example of what Verharen terms “African Optimism”, which is a state where the future of Africa and its people are the creators of the future histories of mankind (Verharen 202). By actively writing texts that exemplify positive African American characters, Jones steers away from the current pattern that plagues most Science Fiction. Jones has created a strong female lead that, “will not

wait to die” and his tired of running from her fears, now readily fights any man or beast that stands between her and survival. Jones illustrates Niobe as barefoot throughout the series, this is due to the characters all having a connection to earth. Most African tribes, much like Okorafor’s Binti, have a relationship with nature and the power/technology that the earth provides. This trend of introducing women of color in a positive light, is slowly seeping its way into films, although the over-sexualization of women in Science Fiction has only slightly changed.

## Conclusion

Although there are more Afrofuturistic films, comics and media in the works, it is not without the cliché statement of taking two steps forward and one step back. For every Afrofuturistic creation there are double if not triple the amount of creations that would see African Americans pushed into the background and continuously playing the stereotypical roles that have haunted them since the early 19th century. Afrofuturism challenges the African American mind and the minds of everyone to wander and imagine what life could be like if things were different, if in fact we weren’t colonized and forced into a history that is unfair and the odds skewed out of their favor. Afrofuturism challenges the mind to replace the Dystopic civilizations of the past and future histories, and to change the themes of society to include more inclusivity as opposed to the exclusiveness that is prevalent throughout Science Fiction, popular culture and media. As long as the film industry continues to make demoralizing films that place African Americans in stereotypical roles, or represented as a people that are unable to survive without the help and aide of some Eurocentric counterpart, and the bulk of the public support and watch these films, Afrofuturism and the possibilities that can occur have a stagnant future.

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