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# From Afrofuturism to Africanfuturism[2]: Contemporary Expressions within Popular Culture

**Abstract**

The futuristic representation of the world is an important aspect of understanding contemporary cultural processes, literary and musical trends, and artistic activities, both in Africa and in the African Diaspora. In order to examine effectively the development of the futurist path, I will briefly trace two categories: 'Afrofuturism' and 'Africanfuturism' (as proposed by Nnedi Okorafor), containing elements of science-fiction, speculative fiction, non-Western history, technology, and fantasy. In this article I will discuss how the concept of Afrofuturism has evolved, how techno-utopian visions of the future are created, illustrating terrestrial and cosmic existence, while extracting knowledge about ancestors, mythology and cosmology. Is it a kind of cultural script – based on ephemerality, temporality and imagination – that has been adapted to the conditions of modern popular culture in Sub-Saharan Africa? Or is it an accurate form of crossing time-space boundaries and discourses?

**Keywords:** African Cultures, Popular Culture, Futurism, Afrofuturism, Nigeria.

## Introduction

Afrofuturism, as an intellectual, aesthetic, and philosophical movement, is a genre that includes speculative fiction imagining life and technology, both mystical, metaphorical, and innovative. While primarily critiquing the past and presenting dilemmas and societal issues faced by Africans living in the Diaspora in the context of post-colonialism, racism, and feelings of otherness, the paper turns to technology and science fiction to speculate on possibilities projected into the future. The article serves as an outline of futuristic activity and creativity from the first uncertainly formulated theses in the African Diaspora, to the conscious and in-depth ideas of writers, artists, and musicians, slowly gaining the status of a cultural manifesto, such as the literary works of Nnedi Okorafor, whose achievements will be presented here. The substantive goal of the paper is an attempt to answer the following research questions: how has the concept changed, namely from Afrofuturism to Africanfuturism?; what are the manifestations of both concepts?; what unites this debate on futurism?; does futurism revise or re-examine historical events of the past?; can futurism

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2 The term 'Africanfuturism' has an original spelling proposed by Nnedi Okorafor.

be treated as a reservoir of universal experiences and pan-African content? In order to observe how different creators transform their vision of the future for what has been historically, abhorrently dismissed as a passive or impoverished continent, I propose to analyse the development of this idea in a comparative approach.

## 1. The Notion of Afrofuturism – Theoretical Approaches

The contemporary notion of Afrofuturism, as expressed in global and African popular culture, has been developed in Afro-American thought since the 1960s and 1970s.[3] The practices related to the concept have existed for most of the 20th century, as the Afrofuturist creative movement began in the African American context of jazz music and speculative literature.[4] Some specific roots, defining the genre in the beginning, such as historical fiction, Afrocentricity, and non-Western cosmologies, can be found in the work of William E.B. Du Bois, a writer and sociologist and author of the 1903 books *The Souls of Black Folk*, *The Comet* and *The Princess Steel*. He was most well-known for his non-fiction work and civil rights activism.[5] Furthermore, several prominent science fiction writers and literary critics such as Samuel R. Delany (author of *Dhalgren* from 1975),[6] Octavia E. Butler (author of published in 1979 *Kindred, Fledging*, *Dawn*, *Parable of the Sower*, *Lilith's Brood* and *Bloodchild* considered one of the primary writers of speculative fiction),[7] Amiri Baraka (poet and writer, formerly known as Le Roi Jones and Imamu Amear Baraka), Ishmael Reed (author of *Mumbo Jumbo*), or Charles Saunders (author of *Imaro*) have chosen to create the blueprint for Black writers wishing to invent, explore and merge the worlds of science fiction and African American literature. They have been writing within the genre conventions of science fiction and tried to explore fantasy, cosmic realities, space and time travel, a figure of "the Other" – the stranger in a distant land in the context of speculative and futuristic technology, as well as interactions with the supernatural world.

3 'Afrofuturism in Popular Culture,' *TEDx Talks*, 14 September 2012, https://tedxnairobi.com/talks/afrofuturism-in-popular-culture/ (accessed 12 March 2021); Lisa Yaszek, 'Afrofuturism, Science Fiction, and the History of the Future,' *Socialism and Democracy*, Vol. 42, No. 20, 2006, pp. 41–60.

4 See a thought provoking essay about the use of the 'Afro-' prefix in the context of African art: Phetogo Tshepo Mahasha, 'Art Criticism: is the Prefix 'Afro-' (as in 'Afro-Futurism') Arresting our Imagination and Manifesto Salesmanship?,' *This is Africa*, 24 July 2013, https://thisisafrica.me/art-criticism-prefix-afro-afro-futurism-arresting-imagination-manifesto-salesmanship/ (accessed 7 April 2020).

5 William E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, New York: Bantam Classic, 1903.

6 Samuel R. Delany, 'Racism and Science Fiction,' in *Dark Matter*, Sheree R. Thomas (ed.), New York: Warner Books, 2000, pp. 383–97.

7 Octavia Butler, 'Bloodchild,' in *Bloodchild and Other Stories*, Octavia Butler, New York: Seven Stories Press, 1996, pp. 1–32.

Later, in 1994, the term "Afrofuturism," as an ideology and critical theory, also called the Black Speculative Arts Movement, was officially coined by Mark Dery, an American author, lecturer and cultural critic, with the publication of the essay Black to the Future. *Interviews with Samuel Delany, Greg Tate and Tricia Rose*.[8] He affirmed a connection between the speculative science fiction universe and the Black experience. While describing the genre, he posed essential questions:

> "Speculative fiction that treats African-American themes and addresses African-American concerns in the context of 20th century technoculture – and, more generally, African-American signification that appropriates images of technology and a prosthetically enhanced future – might, for want of a better term, be called Afrofuturism. The notion of Afrofuturism gives rise to a troubling antinomy: Can a community whose past has been deliberately rubbed out, and whose energies have subsequently been consumed by the search for legible traces of its history, imagine possible futures? Furthermore, isn't the unreal estate of the future already owned by the technocrats, futurologists, streamliners, and set designers — white to a man — who have engineered our collective fantasies?"[9]

Although the prefix 'Afro-' specified above actually referred to the twentieth-century technoculture and pop culture of African Americans (in a certain context of oppression and marginalisation of communities), and not necessarily Africans, musicians and speculative fiction writers, as well as researchers, they embraced it eagerly. First of all, they spoke prophetically on the subject of an improved future for Africans living in the Diaspora and Sub-Saharan African countries. In 1998, the British-Ghanaian writer and theorist Kodwo Eshun in his book *More Brilliant Than the Sun: Adventures in Sonic Fiction,* widely developed the idea based on the notion of future in music of artists such as Sun Ra.[10] Avant-garde, free-jazz musician Sun Ra stars in the Afrofuturist film – *Space is the Place* (1974), for which he wrote and composed the music – highly experimental, electronic, cosmic, transcending space and time and serving as an soundtrack during a long intergalactic journey. African American music pioneered by other important artists such as Herbie

8 Mark Dery, *Black to the Future: Interviews with Samuel R. Delany, Greg Tate, and Tricia Rose*, in *Flame Wars: The Discourse of Cyberculture*, Mark Dery (ed.), Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1994, pp. 179–222.

9 Dery, *Black to the Future*…, p. 180.

10 Kodwo Eshun, *More Brilliant than the Sun: Adventures in Sonic Fiction*, London: Quartet Books, 1999; Kodwo Eshun, 'Further Considerations on Afrofuturism,' *CR: The New Centennial Review*, Vol. 3, No. 2, Summer 2003, pp. 287–302.

Hancock, Miles Davis, Parliament Funkadelic, DJ Spooky, were seen as a way of escape and a useful tool to critique the status quo of Black communities.[11] As described by Mark Dery:

> "Afrofuturism bubbles up from the deepest, darkest wellsprings in the intergalactic big band jazz churned out by Sun Ra's Omniverse Arkestra, in Parliament-Funkadelic's Dr. Seuss-ian astrofunk, and in dub reggae, especially the bush doctor's brew cooked up by Lee «Scratch» Perry."[12]

Given these circumstances it is unremarkable that for several years, Afrofuturism has become an important area of university research, courses, as well as organisational units, such as The African Speculative Fiction Society[13]. Yet today, the pioneering studies of the Afrofuturist literary form remain *Afrofuturism 2.0: The Rise of Astroblackness*, edited by Reynaldo Anderson and Charles E. Jones, as well as *Dark Matter: A Century of Speculative Fiction from the African Diaspora* (an anthology that contains work from some African-American writers, including the aforementioned Samuel R. Delany, Tananarive Due, and Nalo Hopkinson) and *Dark Matter: Reading the Bones* by Sheree Renée Thomas.[14] A similar, in-depth view was proposed by Ytasha Womack, who elaborated on cultural and philosophical exploration and described it as "an intersection of imagination, technology, the future and liberation,"[15] that combines elements of speculative fiction, fantasy, Afrocentricity, magical realism and non-Western beliefs. To be more precise, because of its unique history, Afrofuturism tries to rewrite the world

11 To explore Cosmic Culture mix check here: 'Cosmic Culture: A Journey into AfroFuturism,' *AfroCyberPunk*, 30 August 2021, https://www.afrocyberpunk.com/blog/cosmic-culture-a-journey-into-afrofuturism/ (accessed 10 May 2021).

12 Dery, *Black to the Future*…, p. 182.

13 Yann-Cédric Agbodan-Aolio, 'What is Afrofuturism / Qu'est-ce que l'afrofutrisme?,' *The African Speculative Fiction Society*, 2021, https://www.africansfs.com/resources/what-is-afrofuturism-quest-ce-que-lafrofutrisme (accessed 12 August 2021).

14 Reynaldo Anderson, Charles E. Jones (eds), *Afrofuturism 2.0: The Rise of Astro-Blackness*, London: Lexington Books, 2016. On the reception of critical works by futurists, see also several useful publications such as: De Witt Douglas Kilgore, 'Afrofuturism,' in *The Oxford Handbook of Science Fiction*, Rob Latham (ed.), Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015; Bill Campbell and Edward Austin Hall (eds), *Mothership: Tales from Afrofuturism and Beyond*, College Park: Rosarium, 2013; Sheree R. Thomas (ed.), *Dark Matter: A Century of Speculative Fiction from the African Diaspora*, New York: Warner Books, 2000.

15 Ytasha L. Womack, *Afrofuturism. The World of Black Sci-fi and Fantasy Culture*, Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 2003, p. 9. See more: Ivor W. Hartmann (ed.), *Afro SF: Science Fiction by African Writers*, [place of publication not identified]: Story Time, 2012; Chardine Taylor-Stone, 'Afrofuturism: Where Space, Pyramids and Politics Collide,' *The Guardian*, 1 January 2014, http://www.theguardian.com/science/political-science/2014/jan/07/afrofuturism-where-space-pyramids-and-politics-collide (accessed 11 May 2021); Ruth Mayer, '"Africa as an Alien future": The Middle Passage, Afrofuturism, and Postcolonial Waterworlds,' *Amerikastudien/American Studies*, Vol. 45, No. 4, 2000, pp. 555–566.

experience in terms of a series of more or less continuous metaphors, multiple inversions, plastic transformations, and necessarily mechanical super-bodies.

Creative Afrofuturist content is less common in Francophone discourses than in Anglophone ones since it is more closely identified with the African-American context. Nevertheless, this trend can be seen more and more often in French-speaking countries and general African postcolonial studies. According to Achille Mbembe, a Cameroonian philosopher, Afrofuturists use art or literature to re-imagine counter-futures free of stereotypes, Western dominance and their subaltern position, reflect on the relation between technology and various black cultures, and to question a normative history, as well as their current conditions in the present.[16] "*The world is a prison we need to escape from in order to start all over again in an entirely new planet or galaxy as in the Afrofuturist text*" – Mbembe said.[17] In order to expand and broaden the discussion around the concept, Mawena Yehouessi proposed 3 steps to Afrofuturism: conceptualisation, incarnation and expansion(s). In one of the essay she presented the issue of embodiment:

> "Afrofuturism is first a matter of individual paths. Between personal fantasies, provocation and leadership, it comes from strong and free-minded characters, and its mission is to give everyone enough courage to free themselves and to define themselves. Afrofuturism plays with common or imposed laws and habits, it writes its own mythology and manifesto […] Afrofuturism is then an original and auto-determined way of life: it is the strength of the myth."[18]

She suggested that blending the African Diaspora with an Afrocentric view of humanity and of Africa with science, technology, and philosophy Afrofuturism can be considered a creative reaction to Western dominance and the normativity of European, American or colonial expression. As rightly observed by M. Yehouessi:

> "It is more than a way to escape, as it offers alternatives to a present that we have no grasp on and that can deprive us from our existence. It is the

16 Alexander R. Galloway, 'Achille Mbembe on Afrofuturism and the "Genealogies of the Object",' *Culture and Communication*, 7 December 2018, www.cultureandcommunication.org/galloway/achille-mbembe-on-afrofuturism-and-the-genealogies-of-the-object (accessed 10 August 2021).

17 Achille Mbembe and David Theo Goldberg, 'In Conversation: Achille Mbembe and David Theo Goldberg on "Critique of Black Reason",' *Theory, Culture & Society/Body & Society*, 3 July 2018, https://www.theoryculturesociety.org/blog/interviews-achille-mbembe-david-theo-goldberg-critique-black-reason (accessed 10 May 2021).

18 Mawena Yehouessi, '3 Steps to Afrofuturism: Incarnation,' *Black(s) to the Future* website, http://blackstothefuture.com/en/3-steps-to-afrofuturism-incarnation/ (accessed 10 February 2020).

> advent of using new imaginaries as critical tools to question the world in order to come up with new narrations of History. Afrofuturism is full of authors who present new – more or less radical but always new – representations of the world in order to think of, imagine and concretise another version of the world. Beyond dreams, Afrofuturism becomes a prospective methodology."[19]

## 2. Futurism and Cultural Praxis – Popular Culture, Music and Cinema

In this way, Afrofuturism, which cannot be defined as only a subgenre of science fiction, has continued to evolve significantly in the 21st century, offering a powerful, strong and conflicted commentary on the legacy of the African Diaspora. The moment the film adaptation of the Marvel comic – *Black Panther* – appeared in cinemas in 2018 (and later won an Oscar), its well-deserved success at the box office revealed that the concept of Afrofuturism had become a truly inspiring phenomenon. However, apart from the kingdom of Wakanda,[20] a prosperous alternative future, this trend has been developing within Afro-American and African art, visual studies, literature, performance, photography, film and the music industry for years, including Senegalese virtual-reality film *The Other Dakar* or Kenyan artistic form of *AfroBubbleGum*. *Black Panther* starring Lupita Nyong'o (Nakia), Chadwick Boseman (T'Challa) and Letitia Wright (Princess Shuri), among others, is a clear expression of a movement, an intersection of sci-fi and African pride, provoking discussions around re-imagined worlds. A production designer, Hannah Beachler, influenced by Afrofuturistic architecture, fashion and Afropunk aesthetics, while describing the construction of Wakanda, admitted the cultural significance of the film:

> "For me, Afrofuturism really was the bridge between the mythology, the art, the politics, the science of Africa and of the culture and the sci-fi. I'm always in this transformative place with everything as far as how it evolves.[…] I drew from a lot of different places, I think, and keeping the tradition involved in the aesthetic and the design language was of the utmost importance, because it's about black representation, the black future and agency using architecture and history and science

19 Mawena Yehouessi, '3 Steps to Afrofuturism: Conceptualisation,' *Black(s) to the Future* website, http://blackstothefuture.com/en/3-steps-to-afrofuturism-conceptualisation/ (accessed 10 February 2020).

20 The kingdom of Wakanda is a technologically advanced utopian society, a fictional African country that has never experienced colonialisation and ancient African traditions remained there a common practice. It symbolises a dream, a vision, of what the people of Africa would have created in the absence of invasion, occupation and supremacy on Wakandan culture. Hence, the story envisions a culture free of Eurocentric imperialism.

> and myth and biomimetics, and biomorphosis, and all of that went into the design.[…] I think the most important element really is their history. That's an important element to Wakandans, their ancestry, their history. Where they came from, and what their future is, because from the past goes the future, right?"[21]

Wakanda's creators highlighted also some Afrofuturists inspirations in several works that incarnate the Afrofuturist sensibility and disturbance, for instance: in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (with the proto-cyberpunk protagonist),[22] Jean-Michel Basquiat's painting entitled *Molasses*, the film productions of John Sayles (*The Brother From Another Planet*),[23] Lizzie Borden (*Born in Flames*) and Sharon Lewis (*Brown Girl Begins* – a post-apocalyptic tale set in 2049, based on Nalo Hopkinson's 1998 award-winning novel *Brown Girl in the Ring*), the music of Jimi Hendrix (*Electric Ladyland*) and Miles Davis (techno-tribal global village *On the Corner*), Hancock (fusion-jazz cyberfunk *Future Shock*), as well as Planet Patrol, Wrap 9's, Afrika Bambaataa, Alvin Toffler, comics of Milestone Media or graffiti of Rammellzee. What is important, the nuances of consent and identity are recurring themes for all artists and leading proponents of contemporary Afrofuturism. In the contemporary music world, provocative and stimulating singers like Erykah Badu, Missy Elliott, Janelle Monáe (songwriter, singer, actress, activist with her recent album *Dirty Computer*), Lina Iris Victor, Kendrick Lamar, Rihanna, Solange Knowles, Blitz the Ambassador took their listeners on a journey into a world of pop, psychedelic jazz, funk and dub, but infused elements of space travel, future and unrealistic utopia.[24] The styles musicians employed in their work was not incidental to their futuristic philosophy. It serves as a means of gluing together highly diverse materials, approaches and visions. In other words, Afrofuturist music is treated as a continuation of a simultaneous futuristic reality, organised in accordance with a utopian model, which did not respect the model rules of aesthetic stylisation.[25]

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21 Brad Gullickson, 'Building Wakanda: An Interview with "Black Panther" Production Designer Hannah Beachler,' *Film School Rejects*, 7 February 2018, https://filmschoolrejects.com/black-panther-interview-production-designer-hannah-beachler/ (accessed 4 May 2020).

22 Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*, New York: Vintage, 1989 [1952].

23 Joni Boyd Acuff, 'Afrofuturism: Reimagining Art Curricula for Black Existence,' *Art Education*, Vols. 73, 3, 2020, pp. 13–21.

24 See more: Patrycja Kozieł, 'Z Kinszasy na Księżyc. Afrofuturystyczna mbira,' [From Kinshasa to the Moon. Afrofuturistic mbira], *Glissando*, Vol. 40, 2021, p. 31–39; Marlo David, 'Afrofuturism and Post-Soul Possibility in Black Popular Music,' *African American Review*, Vols. 41, 4, 2007, pp. 695–707.

25 Patrycja Kozieł, 'Afrofuturism – Few Reflections on Musical Narratives,' *African Popular Cultures*, 2020, www.africanpopculture.wordpress.com/2020/01/10/afrofuturism-few-reflections-on-musical-narratives (accessed 4 July 2021).

## 3. Toward Africanfuturism – Differences and Reconsiderations in Literature

It is worth noting here how the concept has transformed in recent years, most visibly in literature,where there has been a great expansion in futurism engagement initiatives. Many authors recognise excellence in African speculative fiction, known for its utopian and liberation themes, and seek to change the fact that the publishing world's centre of gravity still remains Western. To fully capture the distinct parameters that define the development of the genre, it needs to be admitted that the movement is renewing attention in the book world and has a profound effect on African pop culture that exists at the intersection of futurism and fantasy. Indeed, the challenge is how different experiences, cultural appropriation, the need self-legitimation, spirituality and representation are reconstructed within novels and short stories, such as: *Children of Blood and Bone* by Tomi Adeyemi, *Trazer: Kids of Stolen Tomorrow* by Joseph O. Adegboyega-Edun, *Nigerians in Space* and *After the Flare* by Deji Bryce Olukotun, *The Intuitionist* by Colson Whitehead, *The Pray of Gods* by Nicky Dryden, *An Unkindness of Ghosts* by Rivers Solomon, *The Galaxy Game* and *Redemption in Indigo* by Karen Lord, *The Murders of Molly Southbourne* and *Rosewater* by Tade Thompson or *What It Means When A Man Falls From the Sky* by Lesley Nneka Arimah. More recently, the contemplation over the shape of vividly rendered future for Africans – this time outside the Diaspora context – mixing utopia and social dystopia, the struggles of humanity to survive and recalling the future reaching back into the past (including indigenous knowledge, mythology and cosmology) are key issues in transformative and revolutionary works with complex structure, including *The Fifth Season* by Nora K. Jemisin (the first author to win the Hugo Award for best science fiction or fantasy novel in three consecutive years), *Freshwater* by Akwaeke Emezi, *The Raft* by Fred Strydom, *Azotus the Kingdom* by Shadreck Chikoti; and *Do You Dream of Terra-Two?* by Temi Oh, or *Brown Girl in the Ring*, by Nalo Hopkinson. In this possible future, the protagonists located in extraterrestrial contexts or moving through hi-tech future cities, are born with exceptional powers and fight in a post-apocalyptic reality or remain fractured between different realities while practicing indigenous and social knowledge. In addition, the axis of the world becomes a selected African country, community or culture, set in the context of the continent's multiculturalism and multi-religion setting.

A highly self-acknowledged attempt to reproduce the futuristic effect in literature is work by Nnedi Okorafor (Nnedimma Nkemdili Okorafor), who firmly and radically distanced herself from Afrofuturism, postulating she

belongs to a separate genre: Africanfuturism,[26] as a new cultural landmark. Distinguishing itself from the pre-existing name is not accidental, but serves as an important source for emancipatory literary and cultural thought, and has been followed by other novelists. Okorafor, who concerns herself with broad cultural and creative phenomena, is a futurist pioneer, an award-winning novelist of African-based science fiction, magical realism and fantasy. As Nigerian-American, born and raised in the United States (one of the birthplaces of classic science fiction) to Nigerian immigrant parents, Okorafor is best known for weaving different African cultures and her Nigerian heritage into creative, fantastic settings (Nigerian, Namibian or hybrid). Among her works aimed at both adults and adolescents, one should mention: *Lagoon* (2015, a British Science Fiction Association Award finalist in the category of Best Novel), *Who Fears Death* (2010, a World Fantasy Award winner for best novel), *Kabu Kabu* (2013, a *Publisher's Weekly* best book for Fall 2013), *Akata Witch* and its continuation *Akata Warrior*, the Binti trilogy (*Binti*, *Home* and *The Night Masquerade*), *Broken Places & Outer Spaces*, *Ikenga*, *Zahrah the Windseeker* (2005, winner of the Wole Soyinka Prize for African Literature) or *The Book of Phoenix* (2016).[27]

Importantly, in 2019 Okorafor published a text on her blog entitled *Africanfuturism Defined*, in which she coined a new term and professed belonging to Africanfuturism – as opposed to earlier Afrofuturism. Depite the fact that during her talk at an official TED conference in 2017, she discussed the inspiration and roots of her work connected to Afrofuturism, while saying "My science fiction had different ancestors – African ones," the current diversification of genre was driven by essential factors.[28]

> "I am an Africanfuturist and an Africanjujuist. Africanfuturism is a sub-category of science fiction. Africanjujuism is a subcategory of fantasy that respectfully acknowledges the seamless blend of true existing African spiritualities and cosmologies with the imaginative…

26 Nnedi Okorafor, 'Africanfuturism Defined,' in *Africanfuturism: An Anthology*, Wole Talabi (ed.), [place of publication not identified – online]: Brittle Paper, 2020, p. 11.

27 She is also an author of children's book *Chicken in the Kitchen* that won an Africana Book Award and a full professor at the University at Buffalo, New York (SUNY).

28 Nnedi Okorafor, 'Sci-fi Stories that Imagine a Future Africa,' *TED Global*, 2017, https://www.ted.com/talks/ nnedi_okorafor _sci_fi_stories_that_imagine_a_future_africa/transcript#t-548061 (accessed 10 February 2020). Later, she revealed her reasons very accurately: "I started using the term Africanfuturism (a term I coined) because I felt… 1. The term Afrofuturism had several definitions and some of the most prominent ones didn't describe what I was doing. 2. I was being called this word [an Afrofuturist] whether I agreed or not (no matter how much I publicly resisted it) and because most definitions were off, my work was therefore being read wrongly. 3. I needed to regain control of how I was being defined." Okorafor, 'Africanfuturism Defined…,' p. 9.

> Africanfuturism is similar to 'Afrofuturism' in the way that blacks on the continent and in the Black Diaspora are all connected by blood, spirit, history and future. The difference is that Africanfuturism is specifically and more directly rooted in African culture, history, mythology and point of view as it then branches into the Black Diaspora, and it does not privilege or center the West."[29]

The content of the above-mentioned Okorafor essay was reprinted in the first anthology containing eight stories representing the new trend, entitled *Africanfuturism: An Anthology*, edited by Wole Talabi in 2020. At the outset, the collection promises a bird's-eye view of the concept of futurism as perceived by authors from Nigeria and Zimbabwe. It is an interesting phenomenon that some African writers and writers, including Dilman Dila, Rafeeat Aliyu, Tlotlo Tsamaase, T.L. Huchu, Mame Bougouma, Diene Mazi Nwonwu and Derek Lubangakene adopted this term as a way of identifying what distinguishes their works from an already well-established understanding of Afrofuturism, after all, more than a quarter of a century has passed since the forging of term by Dery. Okorafor explained: "Africanfuturism is spelled as one word (not two) and the 'f' is not capitalised. It is one word so that the concepts of Africa and futurism cannot be separated (or replaced with something else) because they both blend to create something new."[30] As the authors postulate, they are demanding a place for Africa and Africans in the future. If, however, Afrofuturism and Africanfuturism can be regarded as similar trends, what is futurism in its new, Afrocentric version?

Africanfuturism may be understood more productively as a globally mobile category of identification, linked to the history of the continent, its vibrant materialism and sonic spirituality. Okorafor admitted that much of Western-rooted science fiction (mostly white and male-oriented) speculates about technologies, futuristic societies and social issues, that which is beyond and within our planet and universe. In contrast Africanfuturism does not need to extend beyond the continent of Africa, and its central default is African. She claimed that science fiction is one of the greatest and most effective forms of political writing concerning the African future. The reason for that is all about the question she tried to answer: "what if?," "what if a Nigerian-American wrote science fiction?" Her first major story took place in Nigeria. Seeing no reflection of anyone who looked like her in that kind of narratives before, she could not relate to stories preoccupied with xenophobia, colonisation and seeing aliens as others. Okorafor took inspirational trips back to Nigeria with her family in the late 1990s and included the magical realism and fantasy

29 Okorafor, 'Africanfuturism Defined…,' p. 9–10.
30 Okorafor, 'Africanfuturism Defined…,' p. 11.

inspired by compassion of Igbo and other West African traditional cosmologies, mythology and spiritualities. She ultimately asked questions: "what if an African girl from a traditional family in a part of future Africa is accepted into the finest university in the galaxy, planets away? What if she decides to go?"[31]

In the trilogy called *Binti*, she described a girl called Binti, the main protagonist, who left the planet in order to seek education from extraterrestrials.[32] In a distant future land of Africa, Binti is a mathematical genius of the Himba ethnic group (from Namibia). She is accepted into an intergalactic university on another planet and she decides to go. Carrying the blood of her Himba people in her veins, adorned with traditional clothes, Binti leaves the earth. This idea of leaving the earth and then becoming something more, a super human with unspecified identity, is one of the most important characteristics of Afrofuturism. It might be well observed that Binti is confronted with the contradictions of the duality of the worlds she was put into. The human world of that of an urbanistic galaxy. We can simply call it a different type of science fiction, but Okorafor explained the difference between classic science fiction and Afrofuturism using the octopus analogy. Like humans, octopuses are some of the most intelligent creatures on Earth. However, according to Okorafor, octopus intelligence evolved from a different evolutionary line, separate from that of human beings, hence the foundation is different. The same can be said about the foundations of various forms of science fiction.

First of all, the author uses the symbols of mothership and time travel, alternative realities, which would be utilised by all futuristic artists. For Okorafor the imagination is productive of the cultural revolution. The narrator is emphasising the sound, colour, dynamisation of the movement and image of the world. Secondly, through including themes such as the cult of African civilisations, materialism, urbanism, the narrator reinforces the certain ways of thinking rooted in the general vision of communities, which are stereotypically not connected to the category of future. They are always regarded as under-developed or still developing, trapped in the past, in contrast to European or American societies, which lead the pave to a limitless future. Okorafor explained it clearly, when commenting *Akata Witch*:

> "To be African is to merge technology and magic. That's a bold statement to make and I can imagine certain groups of African people rising up like angry snakes against such a blanketing statement but so be it. In my experience as an African, the mystical and the mundane have always coexisted. It's expressed within the explanation of things, in ways of doing things, the reasons for doing things. That's just life.

31 Okorafor, 'Sci-fi Stories…'

32 Nnedi Okorafor, *Binti*, New York: A Tom Doherty Associates Books, 2015.

> So add the fact that technology is a part of African life, too, and you get a natural merging. I'm not doing anything in my fiction that doesn't exist already. I got the idea FROM my experiences of being an African, from being amongst Africans, and being IN Africa."[33]

That is why, as asserted by Achille Mbembe, instead of the conventional terrestrial condition, futurists, such as Okorafor, shift to a 'cosmic condition,' which in practice is the scene of reconciliation between the human, the animal, the vegetable and all the other vital forces.[34] What is more, Binti serves as an example of a powerful female protagonist, courageous and fair.

Another question posed by Okorafor is "what if aliens came to Lagos, to Nigeria?" The futuristic vision of Nigeria is indicated in the next novel of Okorafor – *Lagoon*.[35] She develops its narrative across three acts: 'Welcome' (in which aliens such as Ayodele make contact with the people of Lagos), 'Awakening' (an explosion of violence across the city), and 'Symbiosis' (a period of utopian transformation, in which the aliens and humans come together to form a new post-capitalist Nigeria). The novel's plot revolves around the aliens and interactions with three human protagonists: Adaora – a marine biologist, Agu – a soldier, and Anthony – a Ghanaian hip-hop artist, who have special, superhuman abilities. The novel also incorporates various Nigerian folkloric elements: Udide (a trickster spider, responsible for weaving the past, present and future) or Legba (god of language and the crossroads).

> "Everybody saw it, all over the world. That was a real introduction to the great mess happening in Lagos, Nigeria, West Africa, Africa, here. Because so many people in Lagos had portable, chargeable, glowing, vibrating, chirping, tweeting, communicating, connected devices, practically everything was recorded and posted online in some way, somehow, quickly. The modern human world is connected like a spider's web. The world was watching. It watched in fascinated horror for information, but mostly for entertainment. Footage of what

33 Qiana Whitted, '"To Be African Is to Merge Technology and Magic". An Interview with Nnedi Okorafor,' in *Afrofuturism 2.0: The Rise of Astro-Blackness*, Reynaldo Anderson and Charles E. Jones (eds.), London: Lexington Books, 2016, p. 209.

34 To be precise, Mbembe stated: "No single Earth could ever be the sole home of such a futuristic form of life (for which, again, the Black is the prototype). In its historical configuration, the Earth at its core could only ever be a vast prison for humans like these: metallic people, made of money, or wood, or liquid, all in an endless transfiguration. Both transitory and plastic, this human vessel could only reside, ultimately, in the Universe as a whole. Instead of the terrestrial condition, one would thus shift to a cosmic condition, the scene of reconciliation between the human, the animal, the vegetable, the organic, the mineral, and all the other vital forces, whether borne of the sun, the night, or the stars." See more: Galloway, 'Achille Mbembe…'

35 Nnedi Okorafor, *Lagoon*, New York: Saga Press, 2016.

> was happening dominated every international news source, video-sharing website, social network, circle, pyramid and trapezoid. But the story goes deeper. It is in the mud, the dirt, the earth, in the fond memory of the soily cosmos. It is in the always mingling past, present and future. It is in the water. It is in the powerful spirits and ancestors who dwelled in Lagos. It is in the hearts and minds of the people of Lagos. Change begets change."[36]

The last remark bears on the functional significance Okorafor accords with futurism. For Africans, homegrown science fiction can be a will to power and a chance to make prevalent the idea of 'Otherness.' The primary goal of Okorafor was to present the struggle with tradition and constant search for innovation. The fascination with urbanisation, life in the megacity of Lagos and the tendency towards political provocation are also common elements. In the story, Lagos becomes the centre of global action, so from the point of view of people who were deprived of a voice for centuries, Africanfuturism invited Nigerians to perform the utopian world, dream of a bright new tomorrow, seek out their roots and reconnect with their cultural heritages.

## 4. Further Conceptualisations – the Journey into the Future

Africanfuturism is oriented not only on technological innovations, but also on connection with the idea of Pan-Africanism and redefinition of the image of Africa, still associated in global public discourse with backwardness and passivity. However, going beyond this type of explanation, it should be assumed that in reality Afrofuturist authors manifest a creative speculation, focused on internal and native experiences, hopes and fears, and above all the need to reach for a more precise language of expression. Getting rid of the dissimilarity of the white gaze and *de facto* Western way of thinking, they propose another option to fight for – paraphrasing Kenyan writer Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o – 'the decolonisation of the mind.'[37] In their own version, they always place Africa, Nigeria or one of the African mega-cities at the centre of the universe, for example Lagos, which flourishes thanks to technological progress. In Okorafor's short story from *Mother of Invention*, the writer breaks her ties with the Anglo-American historical and geographical context, transferring her story world to the technologically advanced Nigerian city of New Delta in the Anthropocene. The narrative borrows from the social space of Nigeria elements from its most distant areas in order to create a completely new space from them, which is the meeting point of the past, present and future.

36 Okorafor, *Lagoon*…, p. 49.

37 Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, *Decolonising the Mind. The Politics of Language in African Literature*, London: James Currey, 1986.

Following the story of protagonists of comic books, novels, movie characters, artists and musicians in a distant futuristic journey, the recipient (listener or reader) of Africanfuturism simultaneously performs two kinds of journeys in space-time. It can be said that the first of them is an expedition into the physical, tangible, spatial, objective and, in a sense, geographic, world – space, universe, foreign planet, asteroid, distant realm, ancient African kingdom. The unit that finds itself there is surrounded by African people with superpowers, experiences the world in a different dimension, mostly an idealised cultural cognitive model.

The second expedition, however, is an identity and metaphysical journey to the imaginary world in which the point of reference is pan-African community, co-opted between history, the mythology of various African societies, a sense of uniqueness and richness of spiritualities and myths. It is a uniqueness that occurs beyond time and space. It does not often belong to only one ethnic group. This expedition consists, therefore, in the constant launching of collective or individual myths and complexes of ideas about the world contained within futurist discourse. What makes it significantly different from standard science fiction, speculative expression or Afrofuturism is the fact that it is profoundly steeped in ancient African traditions and identities, in order to celebrate the innovation of cultures. It engages Africans in contemporary foresight into long-term cultural, social, and political developments.

## Conclusions

It is critical to remember that Africanfuturism even more intensely reproduces historical and literary evidence, philosophical thought and experiences, showing references to the stigma of colonialism and self-affirmation, topics richly represented in the *Négritude* movement and the writings of Frantz Fanon.[38] To sum up, the theoretical approach to the movement, included in the expression Afrofuturism or Africanfuturism, assumes the use of a new discourse on the work of Africans or Africans in the Diaspora, penetrating into the considerations we relate to, such as global popular culture and the migration of cultural content. The two terms are distinct, but interrelated, because they share a common interpretation and assumptions, and second, an objective. First of all, the two concepts share more than just historical experience. Despite the geographical differences and the point of reference, however, the empirical functionality of both concepts relates to the redefinition of the baggage of history treated as superior, correcting past wrongs and stereotypes about the passivity of the continent's inhabitants. Africanfuturism, in line with Nnedi Okorafor's proposal, is an aesthetic experience that shows its most important

38 Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, New York: Grove Press, 2008.

features: unity and coherence of meaning, unanimity, alternative and subversive nature, as well as subjectivisation in the choice of the creators' intentions. It assumes a greater focus on one's own, native experiences that do not remain in polemics with other cultures, as well as an inexhaustible source of inspiration. Each example holds insights and implications for a dilemma: could futurism be regarded as a form of counter-culture? As I notice, in contrast to Afrofuturism in the historical and philosophical aspect, a change of perspective strongly resonates here. Giving the status of the main subject to Africans from African countries, it modifies both the artistic form and determines the structure of a given product – music, picture or novel, which is inclusive, heterogeneous and connective. It is also a tool for masking discourses that do not notice the dynamic changes of African cultures, unjustly removing them outside the brackets, to the periphery.