

Toward a Redefinition of Afrofuturism and the Black Fantastic--A Postscript

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This ends the debut issue of *Third Stone*, dedicated to Binyavanga Wainaina—Kenyan author and recipient of the 2002 Caine Prize for African Writing. In his 2006 essay, “How to Write about Africa,”¹ published in *Granta Magazine*, Wainaina interrogates the problematic ways that Africa has been treated in literature and cultural discourse across time, described, for instance, as “hot and dusty with rolling grasslands and huge herds of animals and tall, thin people who are starving....Whichever angle you take, be sure to leave the strong impression that without your intervention and your important book, Africa is doomed.” In these words, Wainaina confronts the longstanding stereotypical notions about Africa that predate texts such as Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* and the ways in which those stereotypes have so heavily infiltrated the global cultural imagination, leaving little to no space for historically and culturally accurate representations of the diverse peoples who live on the continent. This, for Wainaina, is a fundamental obstacle that needs to be addressed—a stumbling block that inhibited readers from understanding the truths about Africa and its peoples outside of erroneous depictions of “naked warriors, loyal servants, diviners and seers, ancient wise men living in hermitic splendor. Or corrupt politicians, inept polygamous travel-guides, and prostitutes you have slept with.” Personally, Wainaina worked to create and champion the work of other creators whose work existed not in conversation with this trope, not as some counter narrative, but as a narrative standing tall and proud on its own. His work, described by many, as Afrofuturist in its mission therefore aimed at challenging this flawed depiction of the African past and present and is therefore an inspiration as we probe the very notion of Afrofuturism and how it manifests in different forms of media today.

The first piece, an interview by Seretha D. Williams with Corey Washington, explores the role that musician Jimi Hendrix played within music history and how he has become a key figure of Afrofuturism today. As Washington declares, his “whole swagger is drenched in Afrofuturism,” from his sci-fi inspired lyrics to his wardrobe to his manipulation of sound and technical equipment to thrill audiences in concert halls and venues nationwide. Like Wainaina, Jimi Hendrix challenged daily the status quo of his field, ultimately ushering in a new generation of music directly inspired by the advancements that he made as a musician of the twentieth century. As *Dust* notes in its short piece, “Afrofuturism: Jimi Hendrix,” “Like Sun Ra before him, Hendrix wrote songs about interstellar travel, even including alien characters in songs like ‘Up From The Skies’ and ‘Third Stone From The Sun,’ which was inspired by George R. Stewart’s post-apocalyptic science fiction novel, *Earth Abides*.” Furthermore, Hendrix’s overwhelming “infatuation with science fiction, and his commitment to technological (and psychedelic) experimentation, pushed him to make his guitar sound like anything but.” By envisioning a form of art that transcends the present for an audience

¹ In his follow-up work, “How to Write about Africa II,” Wainaina discusses his process of creating this groundbreaking essay, which began as an E-mail rant in response to the initial Africa issue published by *Granta*--one he describes as “populated by every literary bogeyman that any African has ever known.” Concerned that the issue advanced the same stereotypes while excluding the African peoples from the conversation, Wainaina drafted the E-mail, which inspired *Granta* to publish a new Africa issue including Wainaina’s thoughts (the E-mail serving as the foundation). While “How to Write about Africa” is an important work, one that inspires in part our thinking about Afrofuturism as an artistic and critical lens, it is also important to recognize that, according to Wainaina’s sequel, it was “a piss-job, a venting of steam” that “was never supposed to see the light of day.”

of listeners of his day and age, Hendrix manipulated time and space in a way that is key to Afrofuturist endeavors.

Following this is what artist and cultural critic Nettrice Gaskins terms *algorhythms*, which work to merge “new technologies and computation with vernacular, which is visual, aural, [and] text-based” (“About This Work”) to create both strong and powerful images of Blackness in motion, intersecting past, present, and future—a key aspect of Afrofuturism as we define it today. In “Afro Array,” for instance, Gaskins depicts the wonderings of the Black woman, her thoughts and her identity draped in a multiplicity of colors that reflect the variations of Blackness and the uniqueness of the African-American soul. Similarly, “Fire Writer” gives life to the words and the lyrics of the African-American artist. One can feel the tom-tom of jazz reverberating from every word that echoes from the margins of the image; they burn their mark upon the audience as the words themselves envelop the fire writer in a burst of mounting flames. “Slydoscope” applies then kaleidoscopic lens to the portrayal of the Black male figure, both dissecting and interweaving, his piercing eyes probing the racial landscape of a world so often complicated and far too difficult to understand. Together, these pieces are a representation of not only the present but also the counter-futures merged within Afrofuturist art, for Gaskins is not just concerned with this present moment but with the futures that we are building, not just through the telling of our stories and the reclaiming of our tales but through artistic production--“techno-vernacular creativity” in and of itself (“Biography”).

Like Wainaina, Cheryl R. Hopson in her poems, “On Origins” and “#hertoo” challenges the troubling history of the Black experience, though focused instead on the United States around the antebellum period when slaves had to maneuver the Underground Railroad to escape the throes of slavery. In “On Origins,” Hopson imagines herself as a stop along this daunting journey—“what was, for all intents and purposes, / a nightmare” (ll. 10-11) for her and those who were seeking to escape. Here Hopson highlights the struggle across generations to “reverse the curse, / end it” (ll. 19-20)—a collective action aimed at changing a society that saw Blackness as a contemptible thing and the African-American people as little more than chattel to build and sustain their economy. Her second poem, “#hertoo,” incorporates the activist side of Afrofuturist work, confronting head-first those who harm young girls of all races, physically, sexually, and emotionally. Her closing line, “Get ready” (l. 12) warns them of the impending wrath that they will face for their actions—a core impulse in many Afrofuturist works like George Schuyler’s *Black Empire* and other works of “black militant near-future fiction” (Tal p. 65).

In his critical article, “Racial Reassignment Surgery and the Dissolution of the Color Line: Afrofuturist Satire in George Schuyler’s *Black No More* and Jess Row’s *Your Face in Mine*,” Christopher Allen Varlack builds upon this Afrofuturist vision, exploring the ways in which Schuyler and Row alike not only probe the theory of assimilation as a solution to the color line but also explore the counter-futures too often stamped out under the feet of U.S. cultural oppression. His is interested, for instance, in the ways in which the crucible of fiction can be used to “creat[e] a world in which standard are different” or to “show what values the characters in the story are trying to live out by making them actual, by exaggerating them into the realm of the fantastical, so that the consequences conversely become so real that they are tangible” (Nelson p. 101). For both of these authors, elements of Afrofuturism enable them to put forth a vision of a world in which race is a choice, whether that possibility is positive or not, in order to explore what the world looks like with presumably less of an emphasis on race (if such a potentiality is even possible)--issues that reflect our present reality in this time of skin lightening creams, plastic surgery, and black-fishing.

In his paintings, artist Abdi Farah envisions the critical role that former president Barack Obama would play in shaping and reshaping the political and cultural landscape. Looking toward the future, in “Intruder Alert” and “Boldly Go,” Farah presents imagery of the Black Fantastic, depicting himself running alongside Obama, weapons in hand, prepared to face some unknown intruder in space. Here Farah presents not only Obama as the hero figure but also himself—a direct metamorphosis for the Black male figure who was traditionally cast as the Brute Negro and other erroneous stereotypes that limited his reception in the U.S. cultural imagination. At the same time, he also highlights the migratory impulse in the Black condition, willing to travel to lands unknown in search of independence, power, opportunity, and more. This theme is also present in his piece, “Afronaut.” Having already traversed new frontiers as the first African-American president of the United States, Obama looks toward overcoming new heights. The explorers in these images, however, have no supernatural powers that enable them to overcome the obstacles that have hindered people of color for far too long; they are equipped solely with wit, determination, and their God-given talents to carve out a corner of the world.

Like Farah’s work and much Afrofuturist music, TheActivistArtist’s “Journey to the Center of the Universe” puts its emphasis on the voyage across time and the evolution of self that occurs along the way. In the song, she declares, “Welcome to my fantastic voyage. I’m gonna take you on a ride. We’re going from heartbreak to triumph to the glory in my soul.” From the very beginning, we see the transformation from the pain of the immediate historical moment to the triumph of the counter-future that she has envisioned—one not trampled upon by the political and cultural oppression of the present day. In the process, TheActivistArtist responds to a core question that Mark Dery asks in his 1994 essay, “Black to the Future”: “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?” (p. 180). As we see within “Journey to the Center of the Universe,” the answer to this question is a resounding yes, for the heartbreak of the past is not defining nor limiting for the very peoples joining her along this journey. The music itself, the medium for envisioning this counter-future, then enables her to not only engineer our own “collective fantasies” (Dery p. 180) but also to travel “to the glory in my soul” (TheActivistArtist).

As this issue works to expand our insight into Afrofuturism not only through the lens of its leading figures but also across different media, the poetic sensibilities of Donald Vincent, known also as Mr. Hip, enable us to trace how Afrofuturism works its way into the poetic voice as a vision of the diaspora and as a sociocultural critique of the obstacles to Black advancement. In his work, “A History of Black People,” Vincent calls attention to the blindness of society that denies the beauty of Blackness and the reality that “we be the kings and queens / of ancient cities” (ll. 1-2)—images reminiscent of the words of Langston Hughes in the early- to mid-twentieth century. Here Vincent envisions Black peoples in multiple forms: as “kings and queens (l. 1), as “the soul of the blues” (l. 6), and as “a most beautiful black” (l. 11). He contrasts this with the abuse experienced in a “nation we love” but that “don’t treat us right” (ll. 9-10)—a theme also present in his second work, “The Evolution of the Simpleminded Negro,” presented in both recording and text. The same old tale repeats on this record of history, a country that shows no love to a people who love it dearly and who are dedicated to bringing about its promise of democracy. Channeling Du Bois’ “Returning Soldiers,” Vincent writes in a voice uniquely his own but also rooted in a deep history of struggle; it is a record of that struggle and how that has contributed to the evolution of a people once disparaged for the color of their skin.

The next piece explores the Binyavanga Wainaina archives available at planetbinya.org, enabling us to revisit the contributions of Wainaina to the critical conversations this issue hopes to unearth as well as to cultural discourse on the issues of which he was highly concerned during his lifetime. The archive offers a massive catalogue of the writings that he produced across time as well as the videos, talks, and conversations in which he was an active participant. It includes pieces such as his 2007 “Prepare for the African Writing Revolution” in which Wainaina discusses the voices of Nigerian writers that were beginning to transform the literary landscape with the “hope to build, in an organic and useful way, a community of people who can interact online, read, write and make chemistry happen.” In her interview with Achal Prabhala, developer of the archive, Myrtle Jones discovered that the very creation of the archive emanated from the tenets *Third Stone* aims to demonstrate. Prabhala shared that the archive was the result of an aborted 2006 effort of a larger collective of journals such as *Transition*, *Kwani?*, and *Chimurenga* to digitize their content. Recognizing that, at the time, limited access kept their writers local, their goal was the creation of a platform for writers to reach the full audience that they deserved, pre-social media, just as Wainaina himself envisioned.

The fusion of artistic forms and the interstitching of past, present, and future common in Afrofuturists works then work their way into the photography of Rick Banks—an Atlanta-based photographer. His first piece, “Back to the Future,” interpolates the African or African-American body with sculptural masks in an effort to depict the journey across time and space, back and forth simultaneously through the African future and past. A deep blue light echoes from the center—a contrast to his other images where abstract forms and manifestations of the human body morph in an almost cosmic explosion that speaks to the dynamism of the African and African-American spirit, never static but in a constant state of becoming, of being transformed. These abstract pieces, set against a background of blackness, illustrate how Blackness is the fusion of colors—a multiplicity of unique identities and experiences—thus challenging the myopic view of Blackness and Black cultures that has historically framed the cultural imagination. Like Wainaina, Banks ultimately challenges that myopic vision by revealing a peoples and culture in dynamic flux—the story too often untold that Afrofuturist works attempt to tell.

Together, through their unique insights, these works define and redefine our understanding of Afrofuturism as a medium of artistic and cultural expression but also as a lens through which we can better understand past, present, and future experiences endured by people across the diaspora. They show the potential for art to transform and transmogrify a painful past into futures created by Blacks for Blacks—a core part of *Third Stone*’s mission, as Myrtle Jones declares in this issue’s Editor’s Corner. And in the process, they highlight ways in which we can fight back, recreate, love, resist, and heal, all while leaving a legacy of art (in all its forms) that can inspire future generations to do the same. And so, this ends the inaugural issue of *Third Stone*--the start of our own inquiry and journey. We look forward to the future conversations that this journal will unearth along the way.

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