

Editor's Corner: Sound Carries

Julian Chambliss, Guest Editor

The challenge for anyone considering Afrofuturism at this moment is the powerful ways collective activism is changing what we know. Countless scholars and artists have moved "Afrofuturism" from the fringe to the public square. We have gone from struggling to understand the definition of Afrofuturism to seemingly seeing it *everywhere*. Yet, it is worth considering that Mark Dery's definition for Afrofuturism in 1994 was built upon an ideological framework of speculation. Dery's definition, "might, for want of a better term," be Afrofuturism.¹ Others, Alondra Nelson, Ytasha Womack, Reynaldo Anderson, Rasheedah

Phillips, have expanded on this definition, reflecting the reality of a black speculative practice that embraces possible liberation paths in the context of western modernism.



The expansive nature of the Afrofuturism dialogue today means the effort to provide a fuller narrative must take multiple approaches. The engagement with a black speculative past, present, and future in the context of Afrofuturism opens the door to meaning recovery of black figures that contributed to black speculative practice that we might not initially describe as Afrofuturist. Still, we can easily understand it to be so. In this way, this issue consideration of sound might seem, at first glance,

expansive yet at the same time, if we open eyes and ears coherent. George E. Lewis writes that our view of Afrofuturism has been "bound up with science fiction, but broaden the conversation allows a "wider range of theorizing about the triad of blackness, sound, and technology."² What Lewis suggested is reflected in this volume. The relative maleness of the Afrofuturist sound canon, with names such as Sun Ra or Afrika Bambaataa, is displaced by considerations of Grace Jones and Janelle Monáe. Rethinking Jones's accomplishments through an Afrofuturist lens, but in conversation with Monáe, suggests a tradition of black female Afrofuturist sound we can see and easily expand.

Stacey Robinson's work examines this traditional Afrofuturist canon, but as his interview clarifies, he seeks to create a more holistic history of blackness expressed in sound. His art and interview in this issue highlight an established link between Hip Hop and Afrofuturism. Yet, he is

¹ Mark Dery, ed., "Black to the Future: Interviews with Samuel R. Delany, Greg Tate, and Tricia Rose," in *Flame Wars: The Discourse of Cyberculture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press Books, 1994), 180.

² George E. Lewis, "Foreword: After Afrofuturism," *Journal of the Society for American Music* 2, no. 2 (May 2008): 142, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S17521963080048>.

careful to offer a critical assessment of the potential for transformation offered by Afrofuturism. Robinson's vision has already made a mark on how our collective consciousness imagines Afrofuturism. Whether working on comics such as *I Am Alfonso Jones* or Hip Hop's history, his work provides a catalog of black pasts and futures.³ Recovering the past and forging the future is impossible to ignore in Afrofuturism. A concern with chronopolitic and its intersection with liberation is a crucial part of how Afrofuturism seeks to reshape our thinking. The past is not the forgotten and oral practice communicates the trauma that marks the African American experience and shapes our sense of diaspora. It should come as no surprise that an issue dedicated to sound would consider orality, memory, and community questions. Afrofuturist practice lives through oral tradition passed down from ancestors, arming the next generations with tools to survive.

**Browse the ZORA! Festival Academic
Conference: 2020-2021 Afrofuturism
Syllabus Collections**



The Afrofuturism Syllabus is an excellent resource for educators, researchers, activists, and creatives. The collections contain open educational resources and interviews with content experts on Afrofuturism.

³ Tony Medina, *I Am Alfonso Jones* (New York: Tu Books, 2017).

Dr. Julian C. Chambliss, our guest editor, is Professor of English with a joint appointment in the History Department at Michigan State University and the Val Berryman Curator of History at the MSU Museum. Dr. Chambliss is a scholar engaged with real and imagined spaces and public and digital humanities. To learn more about Dr. Chambliss's work, see read his book *Cities Imagined*, listen to his podcast *Every Tongue Got to Confess*, and visit his website: julianchambliss.com

