

Shantay Robinson, "Afrofuturism: Reimagining the Past and Telling a Black Fantastic Future," *ARTnews*, February 18, 2025

ARTnews

[home](#) • [artnews](#) • [artists](#)

Afrofuturism: Reimagining the Past and Telling a Black Fantastic Future

BY **SHANTAY ROBINSON**

February 18, 2025 12:46pm



Alisha B. Wormsley, *The Last Billboard*, Pittsburgh, PA, 2017
COURTESY OF THE ARTIST.

There are Black people in the future.” In 2017, contemporary visual artist Alisha B. Wormsley began placing those words on billboards across the country in cities including Pittsburgh, Detroit, Charlotte, New York City, Kansas City, and Houston. According to Wormsley, the phrase started out as a “Black nerd sci-fi joke.” But after her billboard was removed in Pittsburgh for being interpreted as divisive, it became clear that a perspective that imagines and includes Black people in futuristic narratives was needed.

Enter Afrofuturism, a cultural movement now having a rebirth, empowering a people about whom degrading narratives have been disseminated for centuries. These

derogatory narratives are so engrained in American culture that we all lived with them even on household products; the images of Aunt Jemima and Uncle Ben, for instance, weren't discontinued until 2020. Afrofuturistic narratives afford Black people alternative stories that empower and humanize them. Though Afrofuturism existed in the margins of cultural production for decades, its move to the mainstream in recent years is evidence of a shift in the public consciousness.



Chadwick Boseman in *Black Panther*, 2018
COPYRIGHT © MARVEL. COPYRIGHT © WALT DISNEY STUDIOS MOTION PICTURES.
COURTESY EVERETT COLLECTION.

The term Afrofuturism was coined by Mark Dery in an essay published in 1994 titled “Black to the Future: Interviews with Samuel R. Delaney, Greg Tate, and Tricia Rose,” to describe “speculative fiction that treats African-American themes and addresses African-American concerns in the context of twentieth-century technoculture.” The term has gone on to be applied to the arts where Black creators imagine the future by reconceptualizing the present and reimagining the past. And while it's defined as an African American phenomenon, Afrofuturism has become a worldwide movement, even producing an African offshoot, Africanfuturism.

Ryan Coogler's 2018 film *Black Panther* took a speculative approach to African life in its depiction of Wakanda, a fictionalized African nation unscathed by European colonialism. The story depicted Africa of the present day, rich with resources and wealth. And it brought the notion of Africa as a prosperous force to a wider public. The blockbuster hit that *Black Panther* was allowed Afrofuturistic narratives—always evolving through literature, television, and music—to permeate the mainstream.



Mallori Johnson in the FX series “Kindred” (2022), based on the book by Octavia Butler

More than 70 years before the coinage of the term, W.E.B. DuBois anticipated Afrofuturism with his 1920 short story *The Comet*. The story depicts a Black man and white woman as the lone survivors after a celestial object crashes into Earth. DuBois imagines what the world would be like without racist societal norms. In this piece of speculative fiction, the Black man is granted his humanity as he and the white woman are linked together by their circumstance.

Many scholars cite the inclusion of the character Lieutenant Uhura on *Star Trek*, beginning in the 1960s, as pivotal in allowing Black people to feel included in science fiction by seeing someone who looked like them in an important and vital role in a futuristic narrative. But this depiction was something of an outlier. The Black science fiction writer Samuel Delaney once noted that the lack of Black people in speculative fictional narratives in books and films almost amounts to erasure. During a lecture he gave at the Studio Museum in Harlem, he said, “We need images of tomorrow, and our people need them more than most.”

Since Uhura’s time, other notable proto-Afrofuturistic texts have been created. These include *Kindred*, Octavia Butler’s 1978 novel about time travel, which was turned into a short-lived FX television series, and Butler’s 1993 *Parable of the Sower*, which regained popularity during the Covid pandemic for its ominous story line based on climate change and social inequality.



Sun Ra on the Golden Gate Bridge, San Francisco, November 10, 1974
REDFERNS

While literature, television, and movies are where Afrofuturistic narratives can express well-developed concepts, music is where the soul of Afrofuturism can best be felt. From the mid-1950s, Le Sony'r Ra, better known as Sun Ra, led an experimental music group called the Sun Ra Arkestra. Sun Ra was a pioneer of Afrofuturism for his music, but also for his claim that he had traveled to Saturn.

Another Afrofuturistic band, Parliament Funkadelic, led by George Clinton, emerged in the 1970s with a brand of funk music that would inspire hip-hop artists like Dr. Dre, Snoop Dogg, Erick Sermon, and Redman. The band's stage shows embodied Afrofuturistic ideals with the notion of space travel via the P Funk Mothership, which would appear on stage during performances (it is now in the collection of the National Museum of African American History and Culture). Musical artists including Janelle Monae and Flying Lotus continue to create Afrofuturistic music and develop accompanying narratives through their music videos.



Band leader George Clinton emerges from The Mothership of the funk band Parliament-Funkadelic onstage on June 4, 1977 at the Coliseum in Los Angeles, California
MICHAEL OCHS ARCHIVES/GETTY IMAGES.

Visual artists are also contributing to the corpus of Afrofuturistic creative output, several of them using the mythical story of Drexciya to create narratives that reimagine the world. The myth of Drexciya comes from a techno music duo of the same name who, in the liner

notes of their studio album, included the story of captured pregnant African women who were thrown off slave ships or jumped from these ships to escape enslavement. According to the myth, the children born of these women had the ability to breathe underwater and created the metropolis of Drexciya. Visual artists like Wormsley, Ellen Gallagher, Ayana V. Jackson, Firelei Báez, and Andrea Chung have all employed Drexciyan mythology in their art, imagining the impact of an undersea Black empire on the world and making art that helps us imagine the possibilities.

Visual artists currently at the forefront of the Afrofuturist movement include Wangechi Mutu and Sanford Biggers. Mutu's collages, installations, sculptures, and videos depict the Black female bodies morphing into otherworldly beings, upending our preconceived notions of Black femininity. Biggers reimagines the past with his architectural quilts, alluding to the idea that quilts were part of the message system of the Underground Railroad, signaling safe spaces throughout the network. In a narrative supporting his quilt sculptures, Biggers characterizes Harriet Tubman as an astronaut who led enslaved people to freedom by navigating the stars.



Wangechi Mutu, *The Glider*, 2021

COPYRIGHT © WANGECHI MUTU. COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND GLADSTONE GALLERY.

In “Black to the Future,” the late cultural critic Greg Tate is quoted as asking, “Where does science fiction end and black existence begin, in America?” Science fiction offers a space for imagining a utopian future apart from the traumas of lived Black experience. With its astonishing origin story, Black existence in America seems itself like a science fiction project. The past proves stupefying, in fact, considering how Black people emerged out of the inhumane system of slavery and gained a semblance of equality. Still, without inclusion in forward-thinking narratives that depict the future, that existence seems precarious.

Dery wonders, “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?” Three decades since the term *Afrofuturism* was coined, the question still merits consideration. When school systems across the country are attempting to ban curricula that teach about Black history in America, how can Black children reconcile their lived conditions? How can they understand their social classes and imagine ways to advance their social statuses? Afrofuturism is doing the work of creating narratives where Black people reclaim their humanity and affirm a place for themselves in the future.