Afrofuturism, 'Black Panther' & the digital divide

Words: Clara Rose Thornton / Photography: Janelle Monae – 'Dirty Computer' album artwork

White supremacy is obviously such a vast, ridiculous lie, and we are already watching it crumble.

The concept of pan-"whiteness" across European national identities is a recent capitalist construction, serving to justify West African slavery to build Europeans a "New World", e.g. North, Central and South America - a manifest destiny fantasy. The word 'race', as currently understood, was introduced into the English language around the year 1580, influenced by same word in French, first documented in 1512.

The idea of race, and the hierarchy associated with it, began to denote naturalised power in the late 1700s when European nations increased the thrust of imperialism. As opposed to an obsession with prestigious bloodlines - being culturally, religiously and/or ancestrally superior by way of noble lineage - race was a way to quickly categorise and monetise skin colour, as well as its assumed cultural geography. Via the Age of Imperialism's logic, humanity breaks down into three categories: European, Indian and African. Or, 'scientifically', Caucasoid, Mongoloid and Negroid, terms still used today. One can see a short-sightedness directly related to where European imperialism was focused: Africa and Asia.

Like many aspects of European cultures then, the concept was exported to the rest of the world. In other lands, idiosyncratic versions of the race concept developed, though there remained a unifying principle: Society is a colour game, and white is right. This is why white supremacy is not only active in white societies. It's why skin bleaching creams are a multi-billion-dollar industry, sold in grocery store checkout lines across South America, Africa and Asia. It's why in the United States black women still wage cultural war against one another about who has 'good hair' (straight, seen as closer to whiteness) versus who has 'nappy' (black hair's natural state). And it's why perception of deep skin colours is often psychologically linked to a state of poverty, need and tech inferiority.

The latter is one of the most fascinating reasons for Afrofuturism's cultural urgency. It's a reason for its effectiveness at correcting and balancing the flimsy and recent supremacy narrative.

Marvel's 'Black Panther' has placed the philosophical, literary, journalistic, visual, musical and fashion aesthetic of Afrofuturism back in pop culture's lens. It may be the first time you've truly taken notice. Yet you've surely been aware -- and enjoyed the innovation - of purveyors within the lineage of interstellar black expression, which began in America in roughly the late 1950s: Janelle Monae, FKA Twigs, Deltron 3030, MF Doom, Erykah Badu, Tricky, Kelela, George Clinton and Parliament Funkadelic, Sun Ra, Jimi Hendrix, Afrika Bambaataa, and Missy Elliott with her wild cyborg themes and metallics.

Widely considered the genre's origin is the acclaimed science fiction pantheon of Octavia E. Butler, novels described by the author as "grim fantasies". Coinciding with the American Civil Rights and Black Power movements, the early books meld African and African diasporic histories, slave narratives and black liberation themes with time travel, space battles and alternate realities.

Within Afrofuturism, the genre of science fiction itself often stands as a metaphor for the diasporic and colonial experience. The 'other' is a frequent theme: Looking for where a group of beings come from and belong, aliens in a new environment where they have no history nor orientation and the search for utopia in space and alternate worlds, worlds where the 'other' is not feared nor second class. Afrofuturist narratives disrupt handed-down reality and reorient history, where the 'other' often has direct control of her or his life and that of their people.

For example, in Janelle Monae's 2007 concept EP, 'Metropolis: Suite 1 (The Chase)', the techno-entity Cindi Merriweather incites rebellion against the Great Divide, which is a secret society, in order to liberate citizens who've fallen under their oppression. The same is found in the music of George Clinton and Sun Ra, who present themselves as extraterrestrials rescuing black Americans from the oppressive natures of Planet Earth.

A striking moment (of many) exists in 'Black Panther', where Shuri, African princess and scientist, sighs comically as a wounded American CIA agent is brought to her lab, where only she can heal him with the vibranium technology of Wakanda - a nation that's never been colonised. "Another broken white boy for us to fix", she says. Moments later in the film, the healed yet confused 'other' sidles up to Shuri to ask of his whereabouts, startling her she quips, "Don't scare me like that, coloniser!".

It's a comical moment, yet represents a core tenet of Afrofuturist philosophy: In the absence of homicidal control, who has the power, intelligence and resources to be technologically advanced?

Or, as Octavia E. Butler stated to her biographer, "I began writing about power because I had so little".

A potent notion levied by Eurocentrism, upholding white supremacy to the point of controlling ideas of what other cultures are capable of, is called the 'digital divide'. Theorist Alondra Nelson writes in 'Afrofuturism: A Special Issue of Social Text' (2002), that "the digital divide overemphasizes the association of racial and economic inequality with limited access to technology... Blackness gets constructed as always oppositional to technologically driven chronicles of progress".

This, despite the fact hundreds of modern conveniences shaping civilisation were invented by black Americans: the mobile phone, the digital computer, light bulbs, the automatic gear shift, automatic elevator doors, the clothes dryer, blood banks, air conditioners, blimps with an electrical motor and directional controls, electric lamps, gas heating furnaces, the home security system, gas masks, the modern toilet, the list goes on.

Afrofuturism upturns the digital divide myth to construct new ideologies based on individual creative freedoms and social justice, cloaked in African and African diasporic cultural aesthetic. Janelle Monae as her alter ego Cindi Merriweather is an android, but look at her braided coif. FKA Twigs in 'Two Weeks' is a twitching icon in a retro-futuristic landscape, yet with the visage of Nefertiti. On nearly every track, Tricky turns the simplest of lusty hooks into the sound of robots' existential moans at the edge of eternity, yet dig those molasses-covered hip hop beats.

A truer reality can begin... each... second...

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