



The Wiz and Afro-Futurism

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Introduction

Afrofuturism is a term popping up frequently these days, as movies like *Black Panther* and *A Wrinkle In Time* are so popular. By understanding Afrofuturism's origins, students can place *The Wiz* in an artistic context, engage with it in on a critical and historical level, and understand that Afrofuturistic works are a vital part of American art.

Content area, grade range/level: 6-12

Time: 1-2 class periods

Learning Objectives

Students will be able to:

- **Identify key characteristics of Afrofuturistic works**
- **Understand the motivations for African-American artists to create stories, music and art in genres which they had not previously been included.**
- **Contemplate the need for Afrofuturistic artists to see, through their art, a better future.,**
- **Create a sci-fi future in which they belong**

Guiding Questions

- **What are the characteristics and forms of Afrofuturism?**
- **When and why might Afrofuturism have been born?**
- **What can studying Afrofuturistic works tell us about racial struggles and achievements in America?**
- **What is our responsibility in shaping a society that is inclusive?**

Common Core standard:

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.8.7

Evaluate the advantages and disadvantages of using different media (e.g., print or digital text, video, multimedia) to present a particular topic or idea.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.8.9

Analyze a case in which two or more texts provide conflicting information on the same topic and identify where the texts disagree on matters of fact or interpretation.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.9

Compare and contrast treatments of the same topic in several primary and secondary sources.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.6

Identify aspects of a text that reveal an author's point of view or purpose (e.g., loaded language, inclusion or avoidance of particular facts).

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.5.9

Integrate information from several texts on the same topic in order to write or speak about the subject knowledgeably.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.1

Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.2

Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary of the source distinct from prior knowledge or opinions.

Materials needed (For one class period choose 3)

WATCH: Parliament, The Mothership [LIVE performance](#), Timestamp: 6.30-10.30

LOOK: Earth, Wind & Fire album [cover art](#)

LISTEN: [Sun Ra](#), "Space is the Place", Timestamp: 5.02-8.00

LOOK: Afrofuturistic comic books, attached

READ: Octavia Butler excerpt, *Kindred*, attached

LOOK: The Wiz, [original Broadway costumes](#)

Student Response Booklet: Attached

Current Afrofuturist works: Attached

Procedures

Lesson Activity One: Introduction to Afrofuturism

Give each student a Student Response Booklet. Explain that Afrofuturism is a cultural and social movement that may have originated a very long time ago. It became a more widespread artistic movement in America in the 1970s. Tell students that they are going to be detectives, and will

observe a variety of works from this era, and together you'll create a working definition of what Afrofuturism is, why it was important, and why it might be resurfacing today.

1) Read aloud and/or project these words from sci-fi writer Octavia Butler:

"When I began writing science fiction, when I began reading, heck, I wasn't in any of this stuff I read," Ms. Butler told The New York Times in 2000. "The only black people you found were occasional characters or characters who were so feeble-witted that they couldn't manage anything, anyway. I wrote myself in, since I'm me and I'm here and I'm writing."

a. (optional) Ask students to jot down some thoughts on the quote. Is there place in history, the present or the future they need to "write themselves in"?

2) Show the students the video of **Parliament, the Mothership landing Live** (link above)

a. Ask students to write their responses in their booklets. Have 3-4 students share where they think the Mothership is going, what it means, and where they would want to be whisked off to. In 1976, why might people of color have wanted to escape? Is that symbol (the mothership) still relevant?

3) Show students the **comic book characters** (attached at the end of this lesson)

a. Lead a discussion about how the characters are portrayed.
i. What do their bodies look like?
ii. What are the characters' abilities?

4) Show students the **Earth, Wind & Fire album covers**.

a. Lead students in a discussion, asking:
i. How is the body portrayed?
ii. What are the artists communicating with these images?
iii. In what ways are they exploring the past, present and future?
b. Ask students to write their responses in the student response booklet.

5) Play **Sun Ra's "Space is the Place"** segment (link above).

a. Have students draw in their response booklets while they listen.
b. Students should title their art, then share out only the titles.
c. Discuss the music—what did it make them feel?
d. Explain that the musician Sun Ra, when he was alive, insisted that he was from another planet. How and why might he have done this?

6) Select a student to read the **excerpt of Octavia Butler's book, Kindred**. (Attached?)

a. Students can respond to the prompts in their booklets.
b. If possible, project again the earlier Octavia Butler quote
c. Engage students in a reflection on the story in relation to the earlier Octavia Butler quote.

- 7) Lastly, show students the images of the **costumes from the original Broadway production of *The Wiz***.
 - a. Ask students to think about how the costumes are like things they've already seen today. Is the *Wiz*'s costume similar at all to George Clinton's when he emerged from the Mothership?
 - b. How does the story of *The Wiz* reflect the themes of Afrofuturism?

Lesson Activity Two: Defining Afrofuturism

Together, you and the class will try to come up with a definition of Afrofuturism, a term that was only applied to these works in the 1990s, and continues to be redefined and reconsidered today.

- 1) Ask students to think about the artistic works they've seen and heard today. What characteristics were present in them? Write these responses on the board. Consider:
 - i. What images and styles reoccur?
 - ii. What messages did the artists communicate?
 - iii. What can you tell from Afrofuturistic works about men and women?
 - iv. How are the past and future referenced?
 - v. Do you find evidence of healing, liberation and/or transcendence?
 - vi. Why might African-American artists have created characters, literature and music that was other-worldly or referenced outer space?
- 2) Once the class is satisfied with the definition, show images of current artists exploring and embracing Afrofuturism (images attached).

Assessment

Lesson Activity Three: Creating a Vision for the Future

- 1) Just as Afrofuturistic artists placed themselves in an idealized future, students will create a vision of themselves in the future. They should include:
 - a. A description of what it's like in the future, including what the world looks like, who is in their life, what they look like/wear, what their abilities are, and what they do daily.
- 2) Students can demonstrate understanding in any media: including, essay, artwork/cartooning, poem/rap, video, song.

Additional Resources:

<https://seattle.bibliocommons.com/list/share/73249911/1139368127>

<http://www.nuskool.com/learn/lesson/not-human-afrofuturism-pop-culture/>

<https://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/12/fashion/afrofuturism-the-next-generation.html>

https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/arts-and-entertainment/wp/2018/02/17/the-resurgence-of-afrofuturism-goes-beyond-black-panther-to-janelle-monae-jay-z-and-more/?utm_term=.ee91a958e6c4

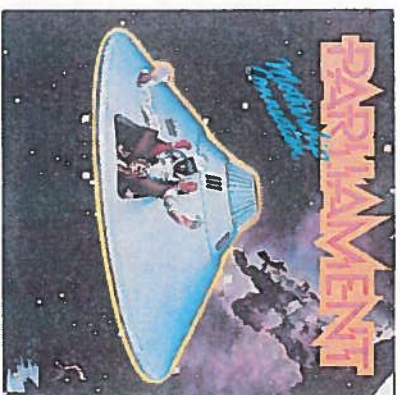
<https://www.amazon.com/Afrofuturism-World-Sci-Fi-Fantasy-Culture/dp/1613747969>

<http://sevenscribes.com/wonderful-afrofuturism-wiz/>

Sun Ra, Space is the Place

As you listen, draw something. See where the music takes you.

Give your art a title: _____



December 15, 1975 Mothership Connection, Parliament

Initial Reaction WORDS:

Watching this video, I'm struck by...

The statement the artist(s) made was:

The "Mothership" means _____



September 1976

What does the band want me to think about them?

How is the body portrayed here?

Looking at this, I imagine...



, 1979

Describe the main character
in 3 words:

Why do you think this book was so groundbreaking
for the time it was published?

How are sci-fi futuristic elements mixed with the
past? (going forward/going back)

The River

The trouble began long before June 9, 1976, when I became aware of it, but June 9 is the day I remember. It was my twenty-sixth birthday. It was also the day I met Rufus—the day he called me to him for the first time.

Kevin and I had not planned to do anything to celebrate my birthday. We were both too tired for that. On the day before, we had moved from our apartment in Los Angeles to a house of our own a few miles away in Altadena. The moving was celebration enough for me. We were still unpacking—or rather, I was still unpacking. Kevin had stopped when he got his office in order. Now he was closeted there either loafing or thinking because I didn't hear his typewriter. Finally, he came out to the living room where I was sorting books into one of the big bookcases. Fiction only. We had so many books, we had to try to keep them in some kind of order.

"What's the matter?" I asked him.

"Nothing." He sat down on the floor near where I was working. "Just struggling with my own perversity. You know, I had half-a-dozen ideas for that Christmas story yesterday during the moving."

"And none now when there's time to write them down."

"Not a one." He picked up a book, opened it, and turned a few pages. I picked up another book and tapped him on the shoulder with it. When he looked up, surprised, I put a stack of nonfiction down in front of him. He stared at it unhappily.

"Hell, why'd I come out here?"

"To get more ideas. After all, they come to you when you're busy."

He gave me a look that I knew wasn't as malevolent as it seemed. He had the kind of pale, almost colorless eyes that made him seem distant and angry whether he was or not. He used them to intimidate people. Strangers. I grinned at him and went back to work. After a moment, he took the nonfiction to another bookcase and began shelving it.

I bent to push him another box full, then straightened quickly as I began to feel dizzy, nauseated. The room seemed to blur and darken around me. I stayed on my feet for a moment holding on to a bookcase and wondering what was wrong, then finally, I collapsed to my knees. I heard Kevin make a wordless sound of surprise, heard him ask, "What happened?"

I raised my head and discovered that I could not focus on him. "Something is wrong with me," I gasped.

I heard him move toward me, saw a blur of gray pants and blue shirt. Then, just before he would have touched me, he vanished.

The house, the books, everything vanished. Suddenly, I was outdoors kneeling on the ground beneath trees. I was in a green place. I was at the edge of a woods. Before me was a wide tranquil river, and near the middle of that river was a child splashing, screaming . . .

Drowning!

I reacted to the child in trouble. Later I could ask questions, try to find out where I was, what had happened. Now I went to help the child.

I ran down to the river, waded into the water fully clothed, and swam quickly to the child. He was unconscious by the time I reached him—a small red-haired boy floating, face down. I turned him over, got a good hold on him so that his head was above water, and towed him in. There was a red-haired woman waiting for us on the shore now. Or rather, she was running back and forth crying on the shore. The moment she saw that I was wading, she ran out, took the boy from me and carried him the rest of the way, feeling and examining him as she did.

"He's not breathing!" she screamed.

Artificial respiration. I had seen it done, been told about it, but I had never done it. Now was the time to try. The woman was in no condition to do anything useful, and there was no one else in sight. As we reached shore, I snatched the child from her. He was no more than four or five years old, and not very big.

I put him down on his back, tilted his head back, and began

mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. I saw his chest move as I breathed into him. Then, suddenly, the woman began beating me.

"You killed my baby!" she screamed. "You killed him!"

I turned and managed to catch her pounding fists. "Stop it!" I shouted, putting all the authority I could into my voice. "He's alive!" Was he? I couldn't tell. Please God, let him be alive. "The boy's alive. Now let me help him." I pushed her away, glad she was a little smaller than I was, and turned my attention back to her son. Between breaths, I saw her staring at me blankly. Then she dropped to her knees beside me, crying.

Moments later, the boy began breathing on his own—breathing and coughing and choking and throwing up and crying for his mother. If he could do all that, he was all right. I sat back from him, feeling light-headed, relieved. I had done it!

"He's alive!" cried the woman. She grabbed him and nearly smothered him. "Oh, Rufus, baby . . ."

Rufus. Ugly name to inflict on a reasonably nice-looking little kid.

When Rufus saw that it was his mother who held him, he clung to her, screaming as loudly as he could. There was nothing wrong with his voice, anyway. Then, suddenly, there was another voice.

"What the devil's going on here?" A man's voice, angry and demanding.

I turned, startled, and found myself looking down the barrel of the longest rifle I had ever seen. I heard a metallic click, and I froze, thinking I was going to be shot for saving the boy's life. I was going to die.

I tried to speak, but my voice was suddenly gone. I felt sick and dizzy. My vision blurred so badly I could not distinguish the gun or the face of the man behind it. I heard the woman speak sharply, but I was too far gone into sickness and panic to understand what she said.

Then the man, the woman, the boy, the gun all vanished.

I was kneeling in the living room of my own house again several feet from where I had fallen minutes before. I was back at home—wet and muddy, but intact. Across the room, Kevin stood frozen, staring at the spot where I had been. How long had he been there? "Kevin?"

He spun around to face me. "What the hell . . . how did you get over there?" he whispered.

"I don't know."

"Dana, you . . ." He came over to me, touched me tentatively as though he wasn't sure I was real. Then he grabbed me by the shoulders and held me tightly. "What happened?"

I reached up to loosen his grip, but he wouldn't let go. He dropped to his knees beside me.

"Tell me!" he demanded.

"I would if I knew what to tell you. Stop hurting me."

He let me go, finally, stared at me as though he'd just recognized me. "Are you all right?"

"No." I lowered my head and closed my eyes for a moment. I was shaking with fear, with residual terror that took all the strength out of me. I folded forward, hugging myself, trying to be still. The threat was gone, but it was all I could do to keep my teeth from chattering.

Kevin got up and went away for a moment. He came back with a large towel and wrapped it around my shoulders. It comforted me somehow, and I pulled it tighter. There was an ache in my back and shoulders where Rufus's mother had pounded with her fists. She had hit harder than I'd realized, and Kevin hadn't helped.

We sat there together on the floor, me wrapped in the towel and Kevin with his arm around me calming me just by being there. After a while, I stopped shaking.

"Tell me now," said Kevin.

"What?"

"Everything. What happened to you? How did you . . . how did you move like that?"

I sat mute, trying to gather my thoughts, seeing the rifle again leveled at my head. I had never in my life panicked that way—never felt so close to death.

"Dana." He spoke softly. The sound of his voice seemed to put distance between me and the memory. But still . . .

"I don't know what to tell you," I said. "It's all crazy."

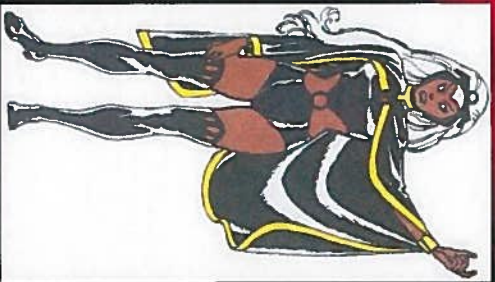
"Tell me how you got wet," he said. "Start with that."

I nodded. "There was a river," I said. "Woods with a river running through. And there was a boy drowning. I saved him. That's how I got wet." I hesitated, trying to think, to make sense. Not that what had happened to me made sense, but at least I could tell it coherently.

I looked at Kevin, saw that he held his expression carefully neutral. He waited. More composed, I went back to the beginning, to the first dizziness, and remembered it all for him—relived it all in detail. I

COMICS & CARTOONS

Original Black Panther, 1977



Storm, X-men, 1975



Astrea, 1977

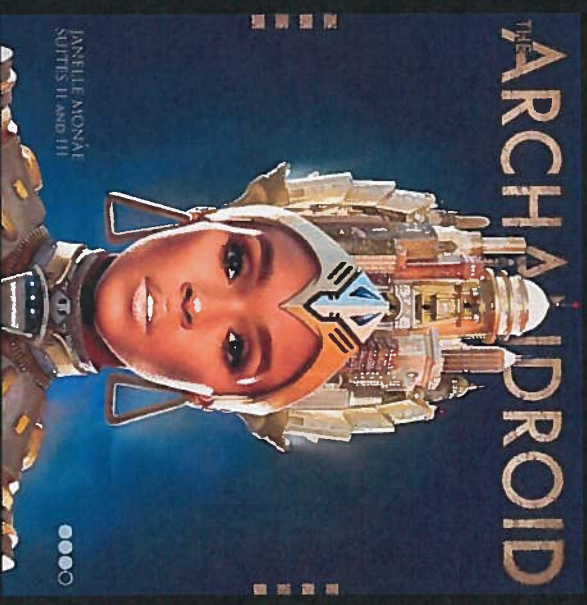
Black Lightning, 1977





BEYONCÉ,
GRAMMY
PERFORMANCE
2017

RIHANNA,
W MAGAZINE,
2016



JANELLE MONÁE, 2010