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.RL.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)

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:**
The "Mothership"

The statement the artist(s) made was:

"Watching this video, I'm stuck by..."

Initial Reaction Words:

December 15, 1975 Mothership Connection, Parliament

takes you.

As you listen, draw something; see where the music
Sun Ra; Space Is The Place
How do you think this book was so groundbreaking?

in 3 words:

Describe the main character.

What does the band want me to think about them?

Looking at this, I imagine...

How is the body portrayed here?

September 1976

1979

KINDRED
OCTOBER 18TH

[Image of a chandelier]
I put him down on his back, tilted his head back, and began
whispering into his ear. "Tell me what you want. Tell me what you need."

The room was bathed in soft, warm light. The scent of his hair filled my
nose, and I couldn't help but smile. He was still asleep, his eyes closed tight.

I ran my fingers through his hair, feeling the softness of his locks.

"What do you want? What do you need?"

He turned his head slightly, his eyes opening slowly. "I want you,"

I leaned down, kissing him gently on the lips. "I want you too."

He smiled, his eyes shining with happiness. "I love you."

And with that, he drifted back into a deep sleep, his body relaxed and
peaceful. I smiled, knowing that everything would be okay.
I looked at Keenan, and saw that his face was very white. I asked, "What happened?" "I don't know," he said, "but I think you were..."

The sound of his voice seemed to pull me out of my thoughts. "I'm sorry," he said. "I didn't mean to interrupt."

I looked at Keenan again, and saw that he was still pale. "Did you see someone?" I asked. "No," he said. "Just you."

I reached down and touched his shoulder. "I'm sorry," I said. "I didn't mean to..."

He looked at me, and his eyes were filled with tears. "I don't think I can do this anymore," he said. "I don't want to hurt you..."

I took his hand in mine. "Tell me," I said. "Tell me everything."