The Afrofuturist Historical Novel

Whit Frazier Peterson

Originally presented in slightly shorter form at the 30th Annual American Literary Association Conference in Boston, Massachusetts, May 23-26, 2019, in coordination with the African American Literature and Culture Society.

The Afrofuturist historical novel is a term that I’ve coined to describe a fascinating and exciting trend that has been happening in Afrofuturist literature for the past several decades, but has not really been identified yet. While Afrofuturism, a term coined by Mark Dery in his essay, “Black to the Future” can be loosely defined as any cultural object that explores the crossroads of identity politics, history, technology, and the African diaspora (really there are almost as many definitions of Afrofuturism as people writing about it)¹, Afrofuturist historical literature is

¹ In the introduction to Reynaldo Anderson’s edited collection of essays, Afroturism 2.0, one can find at least three running definitions from various authors, including Dery himself, who writes that “Speculative fiction that treats African-American themes and addresses African-American concerns in the context of twentieth-century techno-culture – and more generally, African-American signification that appropriates images of technology and a prosthetically enhanced future – might for want of a better term, be called Afrofuturism” (viii); Alondra Nelson is quoted as saying “Afrofuturism can be broadly defined as ‘African American voices with other stories to tell about culture, technology and things to come’” (viii); and Kodwo Eshun is quoted as stating that “Afrofuturism may be characterized as a program for recovering the histories of counter-futures created in a century hostile to Afro Diasporic projection and as a space within which the critical work of manufacturing tools capable of intervention within the current political dispensation may be undertaken” (viii). Ytasha Womack defines Afrofuturism in her book, Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture (2013) as “an intersection of imagination, technology, the future, and liberation” (9). My definition attempts to incorporate Eshun’s diasporic inclusiveness while broadening the scope of the “program” to all cultural artifacts that are interested in the way technology and race coordinate, clash and cooperate.
literature that is concerned with black history, and the relationship technology has and has had to black life. The defining characteristic of the Afrofuturist historical novel, as I am here defining it, is any historical novel dealing with the black experience that fuses the past with the future, introducing modern-day technologies, tropes and historical hindsight into narratives that would not typically include these things, whether that be through technology itself or through historical events. In this paper I will be looking at four novels that can be identified as Afrofuturist historical novels, and discussing the way these novels, by blending elements of the past, present and future into their narratives, give us an enriched understanding of how myths and counter-myths in our culture concerning technology, history and black thought have been created. The focus of this paper will be on African American literature; however, the Afrofuturist historical novel can come from any member of the black diaspora, and arguably, from any writer from any background interested in these questions\(^2\). In this paper I will introduce this sub-genre by presenting a small corpus of four novels I identify as Afrofuturist historical novels. Two of these novels place future technologies within historical narratives (namely Ishmael Reed’s *Flight to Canada* (1976) and Colson Whitehead’s *The Underground Railroad* [2016]); and two juxtapose past and future events within historical narratives (Samuel Delany’s *Atlantis: Model 1924* (1995) and Octavia Butler’s *Kindred* [1979]). While the possibilities for approaches to the Afrofuturist historical novel are endless, I will discuss the way these four particular novels blend elements of the past, present and future into their historical narratives, thus signifying on current myths and creating counter-myths in the process. These four novels demonstrate just some of the many possibilities open to black literature through the Afrofuturist historical novel.

\(^{2}\) The controversial implications of this statement are well beyond the scope of this present study. Eventually, however, the question of who can write Afrofuturist narratives will have to be dealt with in a rigorous fashion, especially as Afrofuturism continues to catch fire in popular culture and the popular imagination.
Part One: Future Technologies within Historical Narratives

I’ll begin with what I identify as the first African American Afrofuturist myth, namely the story of John Henry, the celebrated “steel-driving man” who “dies with a hammer in his hand,” while attempting to lay down railroad track faster than the steam drill, a task which he manages to do, although the exertion kills him. The John Henry myth is essential to the African American Afrofuturist canon because the black body as machine is a trope that appears again and again in African American studies, and is especially relevant when one considers that the black body was seen as only a machine by the white slavers who brought the original Africans over to the Americas. Of the four novels I’m analyzing, three of them deal explicitly with slavery, the exception being Delany’s Atlantis: 1924. Thus, there is some intersection and overlap between the Afrofuturist historical novel and what has been identified as the neo-slave narrative; however, there are also important points of divergence, namely the introduction of technological or historical incongruities in the Afrofuturist historical narrative. In Reed and Whitehead’s novels, the technology which appears in these novels is technology that did not actually exist in the time the novels take place. Reed’s novel introduces this device right away with the brilliant, hilarious and wonderfully inventive poem, written by the main character Raven Quicksill, that opens the novel:

Dear Massa Swille:

What it was?

I have done my Liza Leap

& am safe in the arms

of Canada, so
Ain’t no use your Slave
Catchers waitin on me
At Trailways
I won’t be there

I flew in non-stop Jumbo jet this A.M. Had
Champagne
Compliments of the Cap’n
Who announced that a
Runaway Negro was on the
Plane. Passengers came up
And shook my hand
& within 10 min. I had
Signed up for 3 anti-slavery
Lectures. Remind me to get an
Agent

(4-5)

This poem, written as a letter to his former master, ends up getting back to Swille, who is not actually dead -- nor is Quickskill in Canada -- and catalyzes the action of the novel, as Swille attempts to retrieve Quickskill. The use of contemporary street-slang, the reference to Harriet Beecher Stowe’s famous anti-slavery novel, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* with the “Liza Leap,” the mention of Trailways bus service, all conflate future technologies and tropes with the antebellum
setting in which the action of the novel takes place. The flight, as an actual plane, doesn’t appear again in the novel, nor does Quickskill really travel by plane; Reed is signifying on the word flight itself, and the poem is a brilliant fever dream by a poet still in bondage – as any flight is itself a kind of bondage. The flight is the machine in which one becomes caught.

The poem is celebrated up to the highest echelons of America society, right up to President Lincoln himself, and yet, the social satire aspect of the novel allows us to see the hypocrisy of all those who celebrate Quickskill’s “flight” – both the poem and the action. The flight is the machine in which one becomes caught. The Arthurian Quest is for a grail that is supposed to symbolize divine grace, and yet the divine grace, for Quickskill, comes from within. After all, this quest, this flight to Canada, ultimately leads Quickskill back to the south, the plantation where he was a slave, and where he ends up living with his uncle Robin, who has inherited Swille’s estate. The astonishing series of events that lead to this final conclusion are set in motion by the writing of the poem, “Flight to Canada,” and conclude with Quickskill writing Uncle Robin’s story as the novel *Flight to Canada* itself. Thus, the poem is in some ways prophetic; it tells of circumstances that have not actually happened yet, and it is itself the reason that these events are able to happen in the first place. The writing of the poem sets in motion the quest that leads to the discovery of Canada – not the physical country, which turns out to be just as racist as the United States – but Canada as an idea of freedom, which is found, ironically, exactly where Quickskill was while he was enslaved. This conflating not only of time, then, but also of space, becomes the magic of divine grace, or the “HooDoo” which leads Quickskill to freedom. As Quickskill himself puts it, “His writing was his HooDoo. Others had their way of HooDoo, but his was his writing. It fascinated him, it possessed him; his typewriter was his drum.

---

3 Beecher Stowe’s novel was published in 1852, still during slavery, of course, as it was intended as an anti-slavery screed. However, it would be unrealistic to think that a slave would have read, and would be referencing in writing, this novel to his master before 1865.
he danced to” (89). The typewriter (also technology that did not exist at the time) – the mechanical machine, becomes a drum, a visceral and non-mechanical instrument in which one creates one’s own rhythm.

Similarly, in Colson Whitehead’s *The Underground Railroad*, the famous underground railroad used by slaves is an actual railroad, a subway of sorts, with trains that pass through stations headed north. While a subway system conducting riders out of slavery sounds like a great luxury, Cora, the hero of the novel, experiences the technology as something monstrous:

Cora had only heard tell of the machines. It wasn’t what she envisioned. The locomotive was black, an ungainly contraption led by the triangular snout of the cow-catcher, though there would be few animals where this engine was headed. The bulb of the smokestack was next, a soot-covered stalk. The main body consisted of a large black box topped by the engineer’s cabin. Below that, pistons and large cylinders engaged in a relentless dance with the ten wheels, two sets of small ones in front and three behind. The locomotive pulled one single car, a dilapidated boxcar missing numerous planks in its walls.

The colored engineer waved back at them from his cabin, grinning toothlessly.

“All aboard,” he said. (169)

The whole image evokes Reverend A.W. Nix’s *Black Diamond Express Train to Hell*, a hair-raising African American sermon delivered *ex cathedra*, that booms in fire and brimstone. In Whitehead’s novel, this horrific train never actually leaves the hell of the south. There is always another transfer point, where Cora finds herself trapped and subjected to additional atrocities. It is only at the end of the novel, when she is picked up by a traveling caravan of wagons, that she seems to be on her way out of the nightmare world that has characterized the rest of the novel.
Thus, the machine once again proves to be a deceptive means of deliverance. It can be put to use, but it cannot be trusted, because ultimately it is a trap to be caught in, just as it is in *Flight to Canada*. Technology is the trap which kills John Henry. John Henry did not need to prove that he could work faster than the steam-drill. Indeed, he could, but it cost him his life, the one thing which the steam-drill, as a dead object, could never possess. John Henry’s need to prove his worth against the worth of the machine is what kills him; the John Henry myth seems to re-echo in these Afrofuturist historical novels of Reed and Whitehead; the machine is not progress, and the machine is not salvation, nor is the machine something to be beaten and dismantled; the machine is an illusion – a useable trap, a trap which tries to bamboozle you from realizing the power of your own HooDoo.

**Section Two: Past and Future Events Conflated within Historical Narratives**

African Americans’ relationship to their own collective history is unique in world history. African Americans have a missing history prior to the arrival in the Americas – one so generalized as to become close to meaningless. Most African Americans cannot name a country of origin, there is only the quote unquote Dark Continent, an amorphous land mass, denigrated by white Americans for centuries as backwards and barbaric. Even the family histories within the United States of most African Americans have been lost, as there has been such a long history of rape under slavery, selling of family members, and the inevitable displacement of families brought about by reconstruction and the great migration. Moreover, the history that has generally been passed down has been a history built around the myth of America and American exceptionalism, a myth that is harder for black Americans to accept wholesale. Combine this with the fact that the oral tradition in African storytelling, as passed down from African traditions,
often conflate myth and history, and we see how Afrofuturist historical novels signify on American history, the myth of America, and propose counter-myths as counter-histories.

In Octavia Butler’s novel *Kindred*, for example, Butler tells the story of a young African American woman named Dana who mysteriously travels back to antebellum Maryland, where she meets Rufus, a distant white relative while he is still a young boy; throughout the course of the novel Dana travels back and forth through time whenever Rufus is in grave danger. The novel explores the way racism and the institution of slavery (and its legacy) warped and continues to warp Americans to this day. Butler’s novel uses the familiar sci-fi trope of time-travel and applies it to the historical slave narrative – an inspired approach that allows Dana to experience what is only, for most of us, a historical abstraction, firsthand.

Butler turns her novel into something of a fable or myth in its own right. The story has no time machine, no overt explanation for the reason time is pulling Dana through history, everything is left to the reader’s interpretation:

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. (13)

Dana finds herself in an antebellum South that explodes her expectations. Butler challenges the myth of the American slavery story as experienced by most Americans the first time Dana witnesses a whipping.

“I had seen people beaten on television and in the movies. I had seen the too-red blood substitute streaked across their backs and heard their well-rehearsed screams. But I hadn’t lain nearby and smelled their sweat or heard them pleading and praying, shamed before their families and themselves.” (36)

It is not that Butler is trying to supplant the old myths with a gritty realism; on the contrary, Butler is interested in supplanting the old myths with a new myth, a myth that forces us as readers to try to appreciate the brutality of the moment as observers from the late twentieth century. The surreal horror of the moment is that we realize this is something we can only experience in the abstract, and yet it is not abstract at all; it informs who we are today; it continues to inform our institutions.
In Samuel Delany’s short novel, *Atlantis: Model 1924*, there is also an exploration of family history, but in this case, the family history explored is, on the surface, Delany’s own. The novella concerns a young man – Sam – Delany’s father in fact, and his experience adjusting to the move from rural Georgia to New York City. The central motif of the novel is the Brooklyn Bridge, and the central episode of the novel is when Sam crosses the Bridge, and meets the American poet Hart Crane, who would himself write an epic poem about the Bridge. Thus, Delany simultaneously finds his ancestors in two figures: that of his father, and that of the poet Hart Crane. The Bridge, in Crane’s poem, is a symbol drawing all of American history, culture and life together, and in a sense becomes the central image for the myth of America.

As Laura Michiels has noted, every set of two epigrams before each chapter except one contains an epigram from Robert Hayden’s classic poem “Middle Passage.” Thus, Delany connects his ancestry not only to his personal and artistic origins through the image of the Bridge, but also to his African origins through the image of the ship. Delany then connects both of these images to his personal ancestry through the embodiment of his two fathers, Sam and Hart, thus creating for Delany, a mythical lost land (an *Atlantis*) -- that is, a heritage that he needs not discover or invent, but rather re-collect, as in the Platonic idea of self-interrogation as a means of discovering that undiscovered country already within us. In textual passages embedded in the main text, Delany connects Crane to himself by writing as Crane’s fictional biographer, just as he simultaneously re(writes) his biological father’s story in the main text itself:

Hart Crane and Vachel Lindsay took their lives that spring. Great gifts always set their possessors apart, but not necessarily apart from any chance to exercise them; this gift at that time pretty well did, what is meant is that this distant image of you, the way you really are, (70)
The Hart Crane Delany’s father meets in the following chapter is still very much alive, and has yet to write his masterpiece *The Bridge*. What’s especially uncanny about this meeting is that it follows Sam witnessing a man disappear from a boat into the East River, just as Hart Crane himself would disappear into the Gulf of Mexico ten years later. The writing of *Atlantis: Model 1924* can be seen as an act of a black American writer traveling through time in both directions in order to re-collect his patriarchal constellations, black and white, and become the biographer (or myth-maker) of both.

**Conclusion**

The Afrofuturist historical narrative can be considered a subgenre of Afrofuturist literature. It is a genre with endless possibilities; there are certainly many forbears yet to be discovered and future practitioners yet to come. These narratives have the ability to interrogate the way we think about how race intersects with technology and challenge traditional myths with counter-myths that threaten literature with revisionist black visions.
Works Cited


