Afrofuturism
Fall 2017

Professor Aliyyah Abdur-Rahman
AAAS 164b M,W 3:30-4:50
Office Hours: Mandel 218
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Course Description:
Afrofuturism is a black aesthetic practice that combines elements of African mythology, science fiction, African Diaspora history, magic realism and political fantasy in black expressive texts across multiple media and artistic forms. Rooted in the generalized practice of “imagining otherwise,” Afrofuturism expresses the concerns, experiences, and longings of black people throughout the African Diaspora. Considering such practitioners as W.E.B. Du Bois, Octavia Butler, Samuel Delany, Nalo Hopkinson, Wangeci Mutu, Wanuri Kahiu, Parliament-Funkadelic, and Janelle Monáe, this course analyzes the various ways in which African Diaspora cultural producers – writers, visual artists, musicians, and filmmakers – use Afrofuturism to critique racial asymmetries in the present and to imagine as-yet-unrealized, free black futures.

Our investigation starts in the early twentieth century and proceeds into the current moment to trace the distinctive development, thematic concerns, and multi-dimensional genres of Afrofuturism. As we traverse the past century, we will attend to particular developments in Afrofuturism, including utopianism/dystopianism, Afro-pessimism and Afro-optimism, ecological and cyborg feminism, neo-slavery, and post-humanism. Particular attention will be paid to the ways that alternate notions of time, technology, communication, and mobility inform Afrofuturist politics, cultural knowledge, and aesthetic innovation. This class regards Afrofuturism as a black literary and cultural aesthetic that is profoundly engaged with questions of diaspora, sociopolitical asymmetry, technological development, communication systems, distant pasts and possible futures, and the very definition of who and/or what qualifies as human.

Learning objectives:
1. Recognize the expressions of Black history and mythology in Afrofuturist texts.
2. Trace the development of Afrofuturism from black speculative writing of the early 20th century through the contemporary moment.
3. Analyze the primary themes, symbols, and expressive patterns in black speculative texts across multiple media platforms.
4. Attend to the critiques of racism, colonialism, and genocide that drive the Afrofuturism's experimental aesthetics.
5. Integrate the global perspective of Afrofuturist texts with the ongoing ideals, practices, and political longings of the African Diaspora.
Required Texts:

Books:
Octavia Butler, *Dawn*
Samuel Delaney, *Stars in My Pocket Like Grains of Sand*
Nalo Hopkinson, *Brown Girl in the Ring*
Kiese Laymon, *Long Division*
Sheree Thomas, *Dark Matter*

Film:
“Afronauts” (short film)
*I Am Legend*
*Pumzi*
*The Last Angel of History*
*George Clinton: Tales of Dr. Funkenstein*
*The Brother from Another Planet*

Attendance and Participation:
Success in this four-credit course is based on the expectation that students will spend a minimum of 9 hours of study time per week in preparation for this class. Such preparation includes reading, research, and preparation of an oral presentation and 2 papers.

Please note that your active participation is crucial to the success of this class, to the endeavor of our shared exploration, and to the process of our collective learning. As a member of this class, you are expected to attend class whenever the college is open, to arrive ready to engage in thoughtful discussion of assigned texts, to pose meaningful questions, and to forge eventually your own independent analyses. Your participation must be grounded in reading; your comments and questions should incorporate and direct us to relevant textual evidence.

*Unless used for Afrofuturism classwork (reading, note-taking, viewing relevant course material, etc.), the use of laptops, tablets, cell phones, and/or any other electronic means of communication is strictly prohibited in class.

Class Presentation/Discussion:
In order to make legible Afrofuturist conceptions, imaginings, longing and expressions in contemporary black popular culture, you will be required to stage a conversation between an independently selected, outside text and one week’s assigned reading. For this assignment, you will work in pairs to introduce a text to the class that relates in a meaningful way to the week’s assigned reading. For example, your team might share a work of visual art; play a song; or screen a brief film clip, YouTube video, television commercial, or music video. The point of sharing this outside primary source is to connect major themes the week’s reading to another media or artistic form.
Your team will then contextualize your selected material how it informs, illustrates, or contests themes in the assigned reading each other. (Please plan to arrive to class a few minutes early to set up A/V equipment as needed.) The reading, hearing, or viewing of the material and the initial remarks should run between 10 and 15 minutes. After discussing your selected outside text in relation to the week’s reading, you will facilitate our class discussion of the week’s reading. In total, your team should expect to take primary responsibility for the first 30-45 minutes of the class, outlining the major points of the week’s reading, posing questions to the class, and inviting engagement.

**Papers:**
In this class, students will write one critical reflection paper of approximately 2-3 pages, one analytical paper of approximately 5-7 pages and a final paper of approximately 7-10 pages. Specific guidelines for papers will be distributed and discussed in class.

*Please note that you are required to submit all papers by their due dates. Unexcused late papers will not be accepted.*

**Grading:**
Attendance and Participation = 25% of your grade.
Presentation = 15% of your grade.
Midterm Essay = 25% of your grade
Final Essay = 35% of your grade

**Accommodations:**
If you have a documented disability and wish to arrange for appropriate accommodations, please see me immediately.

**Academic Integrity:**
You are expected to fulfill your class requirements honestly. Plagiarism is when you use someone else's ideas, language, or work and pass if off as your own. This is theft, and it is cheating. Plagiarism is unforgivable in this class, as in all of your classes in this university. Students found guilty of plagiarism risk failure of the course and appearance before the university’s board of judicial affairs.
SCHEDULE OF CLASSES
Note: We will follow this syllabus as closely as possible. If after class has gotten underway, I discover that some revisions are necessary, I will make them accordingly. You will be told of changes in advance.

Aug 30: Course Introduction.

Sept 6: Delaney, “Racism and Science Fiction” (LATTE); Nelson, “Future Texts”

Sept 11: W.E.B. Du Bois, “The Comet” (Dark Matter); Derrick Bell, “The Space Traders” (Dark Matter)

Sept 13: The Brother from Another Planet (film); Dery, “Black to the Future” (LATTE)

Sept 18: Butler, Dawn

Sept 20: Butler, Dawn

Sept 25: Butler, Dawn

Sept 27: The Last Angel of History (film); Brief Reflection Paper Due

Oct 2: Schuyler, Black No More excerpt (Dark Matter); Smith, “The Pretended” (Dark Matter); Saunders, “Why Blacks Should Read and (Write) Science Fiction” (Dark Matter)

Oct 4: Gomez, “Chicago, 1927” (Dark Matter); Due, “Like Daughter” (Dark Matter); Baraka, “Rhythm Travel” (Dark Matter)

Oct 9: Delaney, Stars in My Pocket Like Grains of Sand

Oct 16: Delaney, Stars in My Pocket Like Grains of Sand

Oct 18: Delaney, Stars in My Pocket Like Grains of Sand

Oct 23: Delaney, Stars in My Pocket Like Grains of Sand;

Oct 25: Sexton, “Afro-Pessimism: The Unclear World” (LATTE); Cox, “Afrofuturism, Afro-Pessimism and the Politics of Abstraction” (LATTE); Midterm Paper Due

Oct 30: Wangechi Mutu, The End of Eating Everything (short film) and various images; Frances Bodomo “Afronauts” (short film)

Nov 1: Nalo Hopkinson, Brown Girl in the Ring
Nov. 6: Nalo Hopkinson, *Brown Girl in the Ring*

Nov. 8: Nalo Hopkinson, *Brown Girl in the Ring*; Nelson and Hopkinson, “Making the Impossible Possible” (LATTE)

Nov. 13: Wanuri Kahiu *Pumzi* (film); “Africa & Science Fiction: Wanuri Kahiu” interview

Nov. 15: *George Clinton: Tales of Dr. Funkenstein* (documentary)

Nov. 20: Music by Sun-Ra, Erykah Badu, Outkast, Janelle Monáe, among others; “Hip Hop and Afrofuturism: The Seeding of the Consciousness Field” (LATTE)

Nov. 27: *I am Legend* (film); Diaz, “Monstro” (LATTE)

Nov. 29: Kiese Laymon, *Long Division*

Dec. 4: Kiese Laymon, *Long Division*

Dec. 6: Kiese Laymon, *Long Division*

Dec. 13 **Final Paper**
Discovery and Discussion

1) What motivated you to take this class, and what do you hope to gain from it?

2) What familiarity do you have, if any, with African American and African Diaspora writing, science fiction and fantasy?

3) To what extent do you feel comfortable discussing issues of identity, difference, social inequity, and power. To what extent do you feel that these topics are important when discussing literature?