PEJZAŻE KULTURY ▼

Dariusz Brzostek

Elżbieta Binczycka-Gacek

AFROFUTURISM AND BLACK TECHNOPOETICS: AN INTERVIEW WITH LOUIS CHUDE-SOKEI

In your book, *The Sound of Culture: Diaspora and Black Technopoetics*, you touch upon the issue of Afrofuturism, but in your approach, it is just a part of a more complex case you call Black Technopoetics. Could you explain the term and its connections to Afrofuturism – I mean Afrofuturistic practices and ideas? What differences – if any – do you see in Afrofuturism depending on latitude? What's different in the Caribbean, North America, and Africa?

Black Technopoetics addresses the wide range of black engagements with technology – imaginative, material, literal and cultural – without committing to the identitarianism that Afrofuturism was fated to manifest, particularly as it became increasingly American and as it has become a wider, popular cultural phenomena. For many of us who emerged before and alongside Afrofuturism, the issues and themes that gave birth to it also enabled a critique of nationalist notions of race and an expansion of possibilities outside the framework of racial affirmation, pride, and identity. This difference is clear in the tension between Greg Tate's take on Afrofuturism *via* his reading of Samuel Delany's work and Delany's response to Tate in the foundational conversation that names Afrofuturism, Mark Dery's "Black to the Future" interviews. Tate's desire for a stronger nationalist 'blackness' in Delany's work contrasts Delany himself for whom futurity is simply too unpredictable a context within which to assume racial continuities based on current political and cultural realities. This is why the horizon of Black Technopoetics is always a creole horizon. It assumes that race + futurity = unstable, incommensurable and alien to contemporary formations and ideologies. It acknowledges the historical constructedness and contingencies of race, which because they were present in the past will therefore be there in the future.

As Afrofuturism became focused more on its prefix than its suffix – Afro instead of futurity, in my view – it became necessary to signal a commitment to its foundational themes and issues alongside an openness to a plethora of black approaches to them that were free to resist, contradict, fracture and reject each other and in doing so construct a diaspora not centered on any specific location – Africa or Black America, for example. My work, in general, is committed to wider 'latitudes' of race and

culture, conceptual as well as geographic. As such, Black Technopoetics acknowledges and heightens the internal, cross-cultural tensions at work in differential black responses to / uses of technology or narratives of technology and signals an openness to the incompatible and incommensurable (you are seeing this now in the assertion of an African-Futurism rather than an Afrofuturism – there is more of this to come).

These tensions constitute a richness that enables creolization but also honors a black Diaspora that has always operated that way despite those who would attempt to tame or contain it. After all, Caribbean notions of race and technology, for example, emerge from distinct pasts and address different futures than those that emerge from, say, London tower blocks or even West Africa or Latin America. And the differential rates and histories of access to technology impacts their uses and narratives of it. What those differences can be derived from a sustained engagement with the materials and so require a much longer conversation if you are interested, but the worry is that those distinct engagements and expressions and futures easily get ignored and silenced by a totalizing 'Afro'.

The drive to collectivize and homogenize in the name of solidarity is a strong one in the Black Diaspora, particularly in the West, and it was and is crucial to resist that drive despite the dangers and fashion in doing so.

On a more technical level, 'poetics' is important to my work because it makes clear not only how black cultural forms engage technology but how technology has always been engaged with race *via* metaphors and cultural and technological language in advance of material realizations. Because Afrofuturism lacked a broad enough historical scale – being very 20th-century in its focus and lacking a grounding in the genre of science fiction in advance of formal Black involvement in the genre – Black Technopoetics was intended as a supplement or corrective. Black Technopoetics provides a longer historical grounding in the race / technology dyad and a fuller scholarly exploration of how that dyad has been realized, from the late 19th century to the present and in advance of black participation.

The intersection of art and technology was the point of departure for many Afrofuturistic ideas. Still, it was the music (its recording and production process) which became for years the most important field to develop the practice: DIY tactics of Sun Ra as a jazz producer and unconventional tricks of King Tubby, Lee Perry, and other dub studio engineers to find the pathways into the future. Was the music production the best opportunity to experiment with art, technology, and identity in the '60s for the African-American or African-Caribbean artists?

Music has always been the space where black innovation, expertise, and formal genius has rarely been denied or questioned, even during slavery. Yet because of the racist and nationalist fetish for black/native/primitive 'musicality' as an organic phenomenon, music has not been acknowledged as the primary site of black access to technology and machines. Music was made even more important since it was ever

a space where during slavery and colonialism, blacks were essentially allowed to develop their creativity with less interference than in others. It was often encouraged and enabled for the pleasure of whites and that made possible the construction of black-on-black modes of cross-cultural, transnational communication *via* performances and ultimately recordings. This access made music and the broader sphere of culture very attractive for the articulation of political, historical, and cultural ideas that were disallowed by conventional areas of expression or formal political engagement, which for blacks were often deadly.

So, music and performance attain a heightened significance for black peoples in the diaspora, particularly in the period of the 60s and 70s, which are in the full wake of decolonization, the Civil Rights and Black Power movements. These movements occurred alongside the great technological changes of that period, such as cybernation, electronic media, and space travel. These changes become manifest in increasing access to and desire for technologies of reproduction among black musicians, producers, and artists as signs of possibility, of imaginative freedom, and of a technological acumen often synonymous with masculinity.

However, sound recording has been the primary method of disseminating new information technologies to all people since early in the 20th century; and black people have been key to the domestication of such technologies *via* their songs, styles, dances, and images. But the fact that sound has provided opportunities for blacks to get their hands on the knobs and buttons and wires of Western modernity has not been given enough attention. Afrofuturism brings attention to black uses of technology through sound production and music. Black Technopoetics, however, widens that attention to the broader sphere of technology, from Industrialization to the Internet, from robotics to AI.

What is the presence of Black Technopoetics, especially in the artistic practice of the younger generation of African-American and African-Caribbean artists: musicians, sound and video artists, writers, etc. I mean the transition from analog (dub, sound system) to digital media, virtual reality, etc.?

Black Technopoetics as practice and process has been so naturalized that it becomes invisible, which is the fate of all technologies and technological usages: they become so much a part of life and material practice that they essentially function as organic features of culture. This is also one of the primary problems of technology: it becomes invisible, its extractive and labor-intensive structures disappear or are actively concealed. But black musical technoculture has helped defetishize technology and reduced its poetic or metaphoric associations with whiteness or even the West. It has also been implicated in that concealment, much in the way that black music early in the 20th century could simultaneously function as signs of racial freedom as well as American imperial soft power.

With the new forms of social media and modes of global information transfer, younger generations no longer feel on the margins of the machine, at least in terms

of creating sonic or visual worlds on par with the center. This latter was a much more difficult thing to do in the era of analog, where black technological contributions worked primarily by testing the limits of tape and hardware. With the shift to digital, the limits of the technology are harder to test without an intimate relationship with code and that I think is still to happen (as I have pointed out, despite the range of successes of West African internet crime, hacking is still surprisingly rare).

But it is no longer strange or unique or revolutionary to imagine race and technology in the African diaspora, even on the African continent. Afrofuturism or African-futurisms there are as enthusiastically ensnared in technoculture as other places in the diaspora even with far less access to hardware, or rather far less access to *new* hardware given that so much technological waste is dumped on the continent. For the continent, though, there is arguably less distrust of technology and its narratives than in the West due to a still strong enthusiasm for Western modernization, if not modernity. There we see something that I think is still slow to occur in the Black West: a passion for expanding the sphere of Black technoculture from the musical to the broader informational and technological since on the continent, those latter are still connected to old post/neo/Omni-colonial desires for 'development' and its narratives no matter what the post/de/anti-colonial theorists claim. Blacks in the West are still wrestling with a modernity that Africans are still trying to enter.

The word 'futurism' as a proper name had a very specific background, including 'modernity', 'critique of past and history', but also a kind of 'sympathy for the authoritarian regime' (in the history of the Italian movement). Do you think Afrofuturism could be part of the process of rethinking or reclaiming modernity (and then – future of futurism) without this colonial heritage of the West? Modernity and future for Global South?

I tend to be suspicious of the desire to redefine modernity "without this colonial heritage of the West". That redefinition of reclamation is often a refusal or denial of one's implication in the problems and failures of that episteme. It also reduces black experience, knowledge, and cultural production to a reactive/resistant mode, which might be the standard but does mangle the complexities of blacks in/with modernity. Important examples of our implication in modernity are the very commitment to race (for good or for ill) as well as to forms of authoritarianism that mask themselves by the language of resistance and anti-racist/anti-colonial struggle. This is as much present in Africa as in the Caribbean and the United States.

Also, the reclamation and redefinition of modernity is, in fact, the primary engine of modernity itself. Modernity has been rife with contradiction, hybridity, contrast and cultural, social, ideological, and sexual diversity; so, to reduce modernity to, say, the fascism of Italian futurism or the abhorrence of chattel slavery is to miss the narratives and movements of freedom, socialism, anti-slavery, Western feminisms, queer and sexual diversities and attendant modes of being an inquiry. Afrofuturism can certainly be a part of the latter trajectory of liberationist thinking within an always

redefined or redefining modernity. But as George Schuyler reminded us in the 1930s, it can also be a part of the former trajectory. Both are always possible and often wear masks of each other.

But I am generally cautious about speaking about Afrofuturism as an established -*ism*, -*ology* or formal movement. I would rather say that the themes, issues, and concerns of Afrofuturism – race, technology, futurity, etc. – are already engaging and *expanding* modernity by those modes of scholarly and theoretical inquiry that accompany it such as Black Technopoetics, African Futurisms, and a range of other futurisms, and accompanying cultural and political practices. It is the expansion of modernity that matters more than anything else. That's what Blacks and other people of color have long been doing as its 'conscripts' as the great work of David Scott would attest.

Afrofuturism was an artistic as well as an ideological form of expression of the African diaspora. What is your opinion on the meaning of the term 'diaspora' in the times of 'World Wide Web' and 'new new media'?

I can't help thinking of Rogers Brubaker's notion of 'the diaspora diaspora' here. I've argued that with the relentless use of the term, and its equally relentless redefinition, it's increasingly difficult to imagine a cultural context that is *not* Diasporic, especially with the remarkable amounts of migrations that we have been witness to over the last generation or two. Even those who claim place or nativity are ultimately products of older Diasporas.

In advance of the spread of 'new new media', the expansion of new technologies, and supply chains of extraction that feed that nexus of media and information, diaspora had already moved from *au courant* to *blasé*. It is quite imprecise. Diaspora bears the weight of too many agendas. At times it is just another way of attempting not to be essentialist while being essentialist. For example, instead of saying *the Negro* or, *Black people*, one says *the Black or African Diaspora* in order to signal an ideological or social or cultural commonality or solidarity that only exists *via* the intentions of those deploying the term. These days usually black elites of my own class.

However, the term does speak to the current climate of radical human migration, to an awareness of the remarkable blending of culture and ethnicity due to those migrations and the expansion of technological connectivity that challenges traditional notions of location, belonging, identity, community and cultural ownership. It signifies the realities and illusions of movement and access and power and freedom. That's why it's important to keep in mind that diaspora must always include the many responses to it – nativist, racist, fundamentalist, authoritarian – that complicate and expand it even by rejecting it.

What is your opinion on sonic fiction's (as Kodwo Eshun stated) and speculative fiction's role in the process of developing future-oriented cultural identity through art and technology? In your interview for Futuristically Ancient, you said that black thinking about science-fiction can profoundly misunderstand it

and that many misinterpretations of the genre are, in fact, at the core of Afrofuturism. Can you elaborate on this a little bit? What misinterpretations are those?

Sonic and speculative fictions play a huge role in helping generate an actual movement or discourse out of a series of cultural tendencies and desires. Kodwo Eshun's work is/was absolutely crucial. Such fictions will always be secondary to the work of sound and music, of course, but will append themselves to the work of sound and music in the way that much Black literature and cultural/literary movements have always appended themselves to Black music from slavery to the present.

We do have to acknowledge, though, that the primary impulse still in Black discourses of cultural identity in America and the Caribbean are deeply historicist. Discourses of futurity may find themselves at odds with that long-standing and institutionally and market supported desire. Of course, black speculative fictions get around this by deeply mining this history and its various archives for their future-oriented narratives; however, I think the impulse to historicize remains the dominant one in much black cultural identity productions in the West and the Caribbean, so much so that we'd be naive to not expect some degree of tension.

But to the second question, if you look at some of the founding conversations of Afrofuturism, which were key to the public response and enthusiasm to it, there was a stated sense that it emerged to question or to supplement science fiction's alleged vision of a future without race, or the lack of blacks in such a vision. Anyone truly intimate with the genre would know that science fiction has always engaged issues of race, difference, gender, colonialism, and other concerns even before the era of the New Wave of the 60s, and even during the so-called Golden Age before that. Admittedly some of those representations were clumsy or indeed racist, but it's not accurate to say they did not engage race. They did so either by a veiled focus on red, green, or strangely colored aliens, or machines or in the worlds of Fantasy, *via* elves, dwarves, etc., which were products of the late 19th-century fixation on lost races and magical kingdoms that helped the genre come of age. Race has always been, as Dewitt Kilgore points out, a part of the genre's operating system.

I understand that much of the mainstream pulp that black readers of science fiction read may not have prominently featured blacks or minorities; but enough of in fact did, and quite a bit of the non-mainstream stuff took race quite seriously even though they may not have done so in ways congenial to those seeking the affirmation of similar political views. A significant part of *The Sound of Culture*, as you know, is focused on providing a history of how the entire genre emerges from stories that were all explicitly constructed as a direct commentary on slavery or segregation or European fantasies of reverse colonization.

The genre is far more complex and useful than many Afrofuturism thought and think and is still necessary for much more than providing evidence of racist exclusion. Much of what many like to celebrate as now possible due to black or minority science fiction was possible and present in science fiction texts going back to its

origins: again, alienation and identity, imperial expansion and space operas, radical questionings of sex and sexuality, alterity, prejudice, power, difference, and transformation. This is why I've made it a point to focus primarily on science fiction instead of black science fiction. For me, *the genre itself was already black*!

Now about the future itself. What is the future of African-American studies on science and technology (including history of technology and media archeology) as a part of the process of decolonizing (history, art, academy)?

It's important to note that many of us who emerged with and alongside Afrofuturism but who may not or no longer use the term to describe the work we do, are focused increasingly on race, technology, science, and medical history. Some of the most exciting and interesting scholarship is emerging from that zone and was is inspired by Afrofuturism even if that work isn't calling itself that. Afrofuturism is also instigating and authorizing a broader interest in non-musical uses of technology, alongside work in and on 'new new media', as you described it. It is also the case that the popularity and media interest is channeling much of the more public work into commercial realms. This isn't necessarily a problem and is aiding the emergence of a new class of black media creators on social media, in the visual arts, in music, in Hollywood and in commercial genre fiction (with a healthy tie-in to film and media). But as a product of the underground and the more experimental trajectories of technoculture, I can't help but worry about when a discourse goes pop and then imperial, which is when it becomes a danger to itself.

What is a greater concern for me is the fact that the overall investment in studies of technocultures – black or otherwise – is not as strong in America as it is in Europe. It's important to encourage much more than merely imaginative, colorful, commercial explorations of race, technology, and futurity. We need much more archival and in-depth research and critical thinking on the longer history of science fiction but on race and technology broadly speaking and on capital, media, migration and global extraction. Given the impact and participation of America in all these phenomena, I'm constantly shocked at the paucity of African American Studies work on them.

Now I'm reluctant to make general statements about the future of either Afrofuturism or African American Studies because I'm committed to fostering their radical multiplicity. I have no interest in cohering or collating the various types of work, movements, thinking and discourses that are metastasizing under their rubrics. However, as I suggested before, Afrofuturism emerged in part as a challenge to the historicist habits and obsessions of African American Studies and Black cultural politics and historiography. Those habits and obsessions are quite resistant to transformation, and I certainly hope there will be more open argument and debate about them and about how we can supplement or transform them. Because to do so is to reimagine how race functions in global cultural politics and conversation, and Black thinkers and artists need to expand our notions of being, race, and community outside of the crippling *cul-de-sac* of historicism.

You will be a member of the curatorial council of the citywide Afrofuturism festival, scheduled to begin in February 2022 in New York City. Can you tell us more about the Festival?

There are five of us on the curatorial council, all from quite distinct zones in or around Afrofuturism. And we're working with Carnegie Hall, which has a long history of bringing the strongest and most definitive black music and cultural expressions to wider audiences with the imprimatur of their legacy. It's an exciting collaboration between them and a still emergent, uncontained, creatively anarchic cultural force and sensibility. It will be a citywide festival with an incredible range of events and activities all attempting to present not a singular picture of Afrofuturism – at least not if I can help it – but a panorama of the various kinds of work that either claims the term, participates in a movement or has been influenced by the collusion of themes, topics and obsessions that the term holds together.

It's important to note that all the events and activities to be presented – literary, artistic, intellectual, political – will be organized around music, from the legacy figures to the younger artists throughout the African Diaspora. At this very moment, we are solidifying the musical lineup and so that remains confidential; but after that is done, we will begin building out from that with complimentary events. You'll forgive me for being cryptic, but there is still so much work to be done before it begins in February of 2022. At this point, the best way to learn about the Festival is *via* the website: https://www.carnegiehall.org/Events/Highlights/Afrofuturism.