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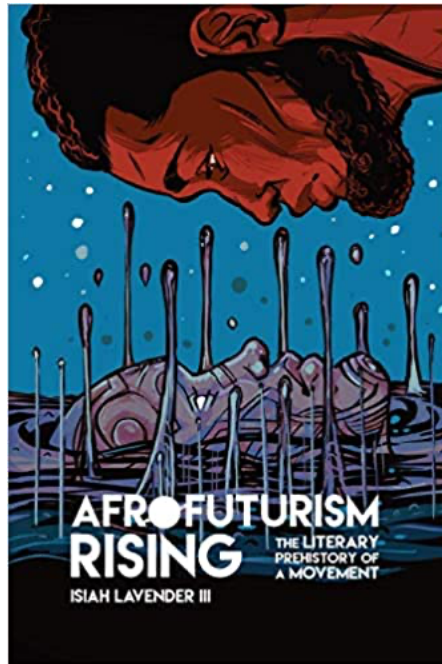
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Review of *Afrofuturism Rising: The Literary Prehistory of a Movement*

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Afrofuturism Rising: The Literary Prehistory of a Movement by Dr. Isaiah Lavender III, sets out to add to the present conversations regarding afrofuturism, and its relationship to Science Fiction. Within this text, Lavender makes a distinction between the two genres by articulating that afrofuturism is both a moment and a movement (2019). The argument is that afrofuturism should be viewed as, “a narrative practice that enables users to communicate the interconnection between science, technology, and race across centuries, continents, and cultures” (Lavender, 2019, p. 2). Within *Afrofuturism Rising*, Lavender defines afrofuturism as, “a set of race-inflected reading protocols designed to investigate the optimisms and anxieties framing the future imaginings of black people” (Lavender, 2019, p. 2).

Within the Critical Terminologies section, the key terms that ground the text are networked consciousness, the hope impulse, and the transhistorical feedback loop (2019). A Black networked consciousness is understood to suggest that there are linkages through memory and traditions that link the past, present, and future, and enable hope (2019). It is this hope that allows new futures to be created. The transhistorical feedback loop is defined as being able to step outside of the present reality to shape the future from a different positionality. These terms are not unique to afrofuturism but have been positioned to provide a specific analytical view that articulates a futurist positioning.

This book would be useful for those within African American Studies, American Studies, English, and Education. However, these target disciplines should be taken as starting points because the text also has utility for non-academics. *Afrofuturism Rising* is worth reviewing because of its pedagogical implications. Whether teaching African American literature in K-12 or the university setting, Lavender provides scholars with additional language to

contextualize texts within a framework that may provide expanded readership. Students may not be familiar with enslavement narratives but, when being placed within the cannon of afrofuturist texts, they may be more likely to immerse themselves in these foundational works. Furthermore, the traditional canonical organization becomes challenged in a way that brings early historical texts into the contemporary moment.

Furthermore, the ways in which Lavender creates his own definitions to describe his categorization of what constitutes an afro futuristic text are important when considering language and literacy education. The impact Lavender’s approach has on language is that it helps students and future scholars understand how to shape language to define their reality in a way that is liberating and culturally grounding. The ability to create language and definitions is important for both representation and identity formation, which in turn promote higher rates of literacy.

Theoretical and Methodological Approaches

The scope of *Afrofuturism Rising* is canonical antebellum, late 19th century, and mainstream 20th-century African American texts. Though afrofuturism has gained more recognition in the modern era, Lavender chooses to center his work within these periods to provide a pre-history as the subtitle implies. The scope is meant to stretch the cannon to include texts that would otherwise be excluded, in order to highlight that Africana writers have been continuously working in the speculative throughout history, and their methodologies are still applicable for contemporary understandings of blackness and one’s place in a racialized dystopia.

Literary analysis, in the form of case studies, is used to apply the afrofuturist lens to previously analyzed texts. To conduct the analysis, the texts themselves are given a close examination. However, Lavender also includes critiques of the works by other authors

within that period, to help ground the reader in an understanding of the classical treatment of the texts in question. Furthermore, each text that is referenced within *Afrofuturism Rising* is analyzed through previously mentioned trifold afrofuturist framework created by Lavender.

Textual Overview

Part I: 1619 – 1903 The Afrofuturist Vista and the Possibility of Freedom

The first three chapters of this text discuss the presence of afrofuturism in text written during the antebellum and Reconstruction eras. The framing of this section is that texts from this period should be read as afrofuturist because they have the commonalities that have become commonplace in contemporary afrofuturist narratives. In particular, Lavender chooses to approach this period as ones of alien abductions and alternative realities that necessitate a networked consciousness, hope, and a transhistorical feedback loop, the latter being most relevant for contemporary understandings of the afrofuturist elements of the work. Through this positioning of enslavement as a series of alien abductions, Lavender makes enslavement narratives legible to those outside of its usual audience. Furthermore, his intent is to highlight the ability of narrative accounts to discuss troubling realities that despite sounding “otherworldly” are grounded in history and fact.

Part II: Afrofuturism and Classic Twentieth-Century African American Novels

The following three chapters focus on *Their Eyes Were Watching God* by Zora Neal Hurston, *Native Son* by Richard Wright, and *Captain Blackman* by John A. Williams. An afrofuturist grid is applied to these three texts in order to show that Lavender’s methodology can be applied to both autobiographical and fictional texts. Each chapter is treated like a case study, and an extended summary of the book’s plot is

provided so that ample space is available for the discussion of why the text can be read as afrofuturist. The extended summaries are useful for those not grounded in the texts being discussed, and leave room for additional critiques of Lavender’s methodology.

Analysis and Critiques of the Scholarship

A core strength of the text is that in Lavender’s expansion of the afrofuturist cannon and its prevailing definitions, a case can be made for afrofuturism function as more than just a genre for categorization. Through a close reading of the text, afrofuturism can be situated as both an epistemology and ontology. Part two, *Afrofuturism and Classic Twentieth-Century African American Novels* makes a strong case for how Lavender’s definitions of afrofuturism have epistemic implications. This is particularly clear in his treatment of the texts by Hurston, Wright, and Williams which show the role that an afrofuturist gaze had on assisting the main protagonists in knowing and understanding their worlds differently.

Part one, *1619-1903 The Afrofuturist Vista and the Possibility of Freedom*, lends itself to an ontological understanding of the spatial and temporal dislocation that Lavender weaves throughout *Afrofuturism Rising*. Using literary texts such as enslavement narratives, one can see how afrofuturism is the embodied expression of technologies (spiritual, literary, et. al.) that combat the bleak dystopia of the enslavement and Reconstruction eras. By framing afrofuturism in a manner that can be read as ontological in nature, Lavender further permits additional points of departure for future analysis of the afrofuturist cannon.

Pointing out the epistemic and ontological implications of the scholarship is important because it permits *Afrofuturism Rising* to be held in

conversation with other Africana theorist outside of the immediate Science Fiction space. Though Lavender does ground the reader in contemporary and historical thought regarding Science Fiction, opportunities are missed to hold *Afrofuturism Rising* in conversation with the applicable Africana Studies literary and critical theories that could have offered additional support to the arguments that were being made. One such theoretical framework that could have offered such support, or an additional theoretical perspective, is Location Theory by Dr. Molefi Asante. Location theory concerns itself with being able to properly position a text with regards to its language, attitude, and direction (Asante, 2009). By including a broader scope of literary theory, it would have served to further ground the claims Lavender was making, as well as emphasize the multi-disciplinary scope of his afrocentric framework.

Furthermore, the conclusion of the text, *Into the Black-o-Sphere* misses an opportunity to further ground the claims made elsewhere in the text. The conclusion instead provides a succinct case study that discusses the application of afrofuturist frameworks to Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and Colson Whitehead's *the Underground*. While this additional textual examination is beneficial in that it both

expanded afrofuturism to include African texts, as well as highlighting the applicability of his frameworks to more contemporary texts. Nevertheless, the way the book concluded left an unfinished feel to readers who may have appreciated an overview of the interconnected nature of the scholarship.

Practical Applications of the Scholarship

Though not fully discussed within the scope of the text, *Afrofuturism Rising* has implications and impacts for multiple disciplines. Within the discipline of English, this text challenges the Eurocentric classification of Science Fiction texts. Though a distinction is made between Science Fiction and afrofuturism, *Afrofuturism Rising* acknowledges and expands the genre which afrofuturism is adjacent to, if not a part of. Furthermore, for Africana literary scholars, *Afrofuturism Rising* invites a different read of classical texts that may shape how pedagogy is performed when interrogating them. Within Africana Studies, *Afrofuturism Rising* creates another point of entering into discussions of Africana epistemology, agency, and narrative formation through memory and transhistorical ideations.

References

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