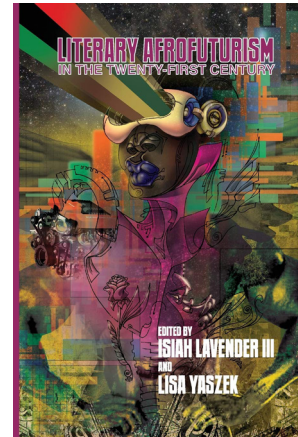


### *Literary Afrofuturism in the Twenty-First Century*, edited by Isiah Lavender III and Lisa Yaszek



Michael Pitts

Isiah Lavender III and Lisa Yaszek, editors. *Literary Afrofuturism in the Twenty-First Century*. The Ohio State UP, 2020. New Suns: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Speculative. Hardcover. 248 pg. \$99.95. ISBN 978-0-8142-1445-9.



*Literary Afrofuturism in the Twenty-First Century* is designed, as explained by editors Isiah Lavender III and Lisa Yaszek, “to introduce readers to Afrofuturism as an aesthetic practice that enables artists to communicate the experience of science, technology, and race across centuries, continents, and cultures” (2). Made up of contributions from fourteen influential scholars, the collection is divided into four key “conversations” concerning contemporary aesthetics, literary history, cultural history, and the relationship of Afrofuturism to Africa. The first section is made up of conversations with creators of Afrofuturist works, beginning with a roundtable discussion with Bill Campbell, Minister Faust, Nalo Hopkinson, N.K. Jemisin, Chinelo Onwualu, Nisi Shawl, and Nick Wood. Including alongside this roundtable discussion an analysis by Sheree R. Thomas, editor of the revolutionary and influential Afrofuturist anthology *Dark Matter: A Century of Fiction from the African Diaspora* (2000), of the past, present, and future of this aesthetic movement, this first segment of the collection makes “space for the voices of artists who explore the intersection of science, technology, and race in their own work” (23). Made up of analyses of disparate speculative works gathered under the intersecting categories of SF and black Atlantic authors, the second section of this collection, Afrofuturism in Literary History, illustrates “how Afrofuturism produced by” such writers “enriches our understanding of contemporary science fiction” (11). The third segment of the anthology, Afrofuturism in Cultural History, applies the cultural studies lens to this genre, and considers how Afrofuturist texts provide insight to black culture and history. Lisa Dowdall’s “Black Futures Matter: Afrofuturism and Geontology in N.K. Jemisin’s *Broken Earth* Trilogy,” for example, highlights the experiences of black, female SF writers within fandom by considering the reception and interpretation of N.K. Jemisin’s novels, which Dowdall shows are grounded in geology, as scientifically unsophisticated and overly focused upon social justice. The text concludes with a final collection of essays, Afrofuturism and Africa, that considers “the complex relations of Afrofuturism as literary practice and Africa as both a source of artistic inspiration and a space for the production of black SF itself” (14). The analyses making up this final section disrupt narratives of technological development as uniquely

Eurowestern, demonstrate how black SF writers use narratives “set in Africa to expose the colonial and postcolonial assumptions that have long driven environmental SF written from globally Northern perspectives” and add nuance to representations of Africa, and considers the importance of including African SF writers in a new iteration of the Afrofuturist genre (14). This anthology is a valuable resource due to its close examinations of the ways black speculative works impact the SF genre, shape and are shaped by the culture in which they are produced, and draw upon the African continent as a source of inspiration and a site for producing these narratives. It is additionally pivotal because of the questions it raises about the future of Afrofuturism as a global genre that will continue to link the creative works of pan-African, contemporary black Atlantic, and historic African American in fascinating ways.

This edited collection continues the work of scholars interested in Afrofuturism as a powerful aesthetic mode that emphasizes the intersection of race, science, and technology. Like Adilifu Nama’s *Black Space: Imagining Race in Science Fiction Film* (2008), Sandra Jackson and Julie E. Moody-Freeman’s *The Black Imagination: Science Fiction, Futurism, and the Speculative* (2011), Ytasha L. Womack’s *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture* (2013), and Reynaldo Anderson and Charles E. Jones’s *Afrofuturism 2.0: The Rise of Astro-Blackness* (2015), *Literary Afrofuturism in the Twenty-First Century* examines the history of this aesthetic mode and traces its generic boundaries. Unique to this collection—in addition to its interest in new and overlooked artists, its exploration of how a burgeoning pan-African literary tradition possibly connects with Afrofuturism, and its opening with a roundtable discussion that centers the thoughts and considerations of black speculative writers—is its specific focus upon the literary output of this aesthetic practice. This emphasis upon the manifestation of Afrofuturism specifically in speculative literature differentiates this collection from the aforementioned texts, which include analyses of this artistic style in other media such as music, visual art, architecture, and film. Like André Carrington’s *Speculative Blackness: The Future of Race in Science Fiction* (2016), *Literary Afrofuturism in the Twenty-First Century* illuminates the impact of genre conventions upon popular conceptions of blackness but focuses specifically upon literary Afrofuturism. It is a significant resource for scholars due to its comprehensive examinations of Afrofuturist literature and its impact upon SF and cultural studies.

Emphasizing the far-reaching nature of the Afrofuturist genre, this collection is ideally suited for researchers desiring a guiding resource through this cultural terrain or scholars seeking a helpful companion for undergraduate or graduate courses focused on this topic. Moving beyond a simple overview of key Afrofuturist literature, the scholars in this anthology utilize diverse critical perspectives to interrogate the nature and boundaries of the genre. Importantly, these scholars also make crucial connections between Afrofuturist narratives and social and political activism. The collection makes “conscious the utility of Afrofuturism as a critical term in the battle to stake claims for people of color—and people of all colors—in the future imaginary,” a battle growing in intensity due to the resurgence of white supremacist political action (231). *Literary Afrofuturism in the Twenty-First Century* additionally offers young scholars and students theoretical tools for

applying Afrofuturist concepts to their own readings and analyses of speculative fiction. This anthology therefore enables young scholars and students seeking an entry point into discussions surrounding this reimagining of the future through a black lens and its commentary on identity in 21<sup>st</sup>-century societies. *Literary Afrofuturism in the Twenty-First Century* is a valuable collection for the undergraduate and graduate classroom as well as for developing scholars seeking a broad understanding of this cultural phenomenon.

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