



Decolonizing the Imagination: Teaching about Race Using Afrofuturism and Critical Race Theory

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“So come on. There’s the future over there. Let’s all go.” -N.K. Jemisin, *How Long ‘Til Black Future Month?* ¹

Introduction

In order to enlighten students to the dangers of persisting dominant culture to both those threatened by it and by those who benefit from it, we must utilize classroom time to consider dominant narratives, both cultural and societal as well as intellectual and artistic. The dominant narrative of our society, for example, while ever changing, excludes culture and race minorities from certain privileges and even from fair chances. The dominant narrative in our school books, while slowly evolving, excludes to a large degree the stories of those marginalized. Plugging in stories and art and music of marginalized cultures is important, but not as important as recognizing its absence as a symptom of American cultural domination by its founding culture. Perpetuated by centuries of suppression of marginalized cultures, rooted in slavery and continued to this day in the lack of inclusionary, comprehensive race education, said dominant culture persists. Inclusion of marginalized counter-narratives therefore is not a specialized topic, but one necessary for growth as a diverse society, and to help American students grow to build a nation of true equality. In order to do this, we must confront and scrutinize colorblind racism, utilize Critical Race Theory, and study and appreciate artists who, while generally are seen as subversive, actually lead us to overarching cultural understandings we are only now growing to accept.

The term “colorblindness” itself for example, is a concept worth poring over, considering on many different levels, and plugging into past experiences and knowledge. The term is complex and in many ways fraught with intensity, tumultuous aspects of American history, beleaguered peoples, archaic yet persistent misunderstandings, and harmful practices that sustain into today. The simple surface understanding of the term – that admitting to the differences in how races, classes, sexes are treated thereby acknowledging and confronting the racism and classism and sexism attached to that – is the tip of the iceberg in understanding how dominant white narratives in this country continue to pervade every opportunity for growth, advancement, advantage, and quite simply fairness for non-white peoples.

This unit attempts to counteract that through literary study using the concepts of Critical Race Theory (CRT) through the work of Caitlin L. Ryan, Adrienne D. Dixson and others, and Colorblind Racial Ideology (CBRI), through the work of Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, Sheri A. Castro-Atwater, and others. Through analysis of scholarly work and academic theory, I will try to reach an evolved understanding with my students of the history of American racism through its modern manifestations, predominantly focusing on the dominance of culture rooted in white supremacy, and how to counter that culture through study, contemplation, reflection, discussion, activism, and inclusion of counter-narratives in instruction. To that end, we will also be exploring the work of classic and modern artists – writers of speculative fiction, pioneering artists of Afrofuturism – from said counter-cultural perspective. Afrofuturism has risen in popularity in recent years with blockbusters like *Black Panther*. This unit will explore texts through which all children can see themselves as space cowboys, aliens, zombie hunters, and other exciting futuristic tropes. We will not, however, be simply plugging in the genre to fill gaps in a largely white narrative of American literary study, although that will be a welcome byproduct. We will be using Afrofuturism along with anti-racist academic concepts as a critical lens through which to study race.

Rationale for use of Afrofuturism

It's tough to ignore the fact that popular culture is heavily rooted in white culture. The Literary Canon is now notorious not only for its historic intellectual value, but also for its lack of diversity and therefore has become an entity of relative ire for urban educators. Teachers often intentionally branch outside of this Canon for books representing and written by people and authors of more diverse backgrounds.

“Nerd” culture is arguably even more entrenched in white culture. The highly intellectual worlds of science-fiction and fantasy – under the umbrella moniker “speculative fiction” – which portray a new world of possibilities, engage and inspire the imagination, and could even result in a successful life course when committed to by students choosing to do so, have been historically white-washed. Of the classic American and European works – the ones we all know from childhood and often into our adulthood: *Star Wars*, *Star Trek*, *Back to the Future*, *The Lord of the Rings*, and others – N.K. Jemisin notes they “claimed to be the fiction of the future, but. . .still mostly celebrated the faces and voices and stories of the past.”² Jemisin, recent winner of an unprecedented three consecutive Hugo Awards (a top award in the genre), writes extensively about characters of color, having not seen herself in her favorites growing up and wanting to correct that.

It is that corrective journey this unit will address. Authors like Jemisin are not uncommon these days, but do have an identifiable origin. Many proponents of the genre would identify that origin as Octavia Butler, including Jemisin herself. Butler, widely regarded as the one-woman vanguard of black speculative fiction, is the most readily attributable influence for modern takes on the genre, as well as the most steadfastly available “classic” sci-fi author for people of color to see themselves in larger, other, future universes. Walidah Imarisha, co-editor of a collection of modern science fiction fueled by social justice, *Octavia's Brood*, describes the late author's intersection of said justice with speculative fiction: “Butler explored the intersections of identity and imagination, the gray areas of race, class, gender, sexuality, love, militarism, inequality, oppression, resistance, and – most important – hope.”³ In the 80's and 90's as many black and brown communities faced the War on Drugs – and modern mass incarceration was taking up speed – speculative fiction marked a space for readers to imagine other, better worlds, rooted in social justice, Black futurity, and

a utopian sense of possibility. Today, social urgency is more overt. #blacklivesmatter and other movements, youtube and other media platforms, have brought the struggle into stark public spotlight, and the black speculative fiction movement is reaching higher heights. It's a perfect time to teach both the modern and the classic.

To have this conversation, we must start with the concept of representation in popular culture. Butler and other artists of the Afrofuturistic movement who will be considered in this curricular unit were and are fighting to be represented in every aspect of popular culture. The underrepresentation of people of color in speculative fiction can be compared to similar underrepresentation in many forms of art and popular culture, and indeed underrepresentation in societal considerations: incarceration, law and police treatment, education, income equality and opportunity, and many others. We will also pore over different yet complementary views on what Afrofuturism actually is.

Afrofuturism, a concept that has underlined many fantastic instances of African-American art and culture since the Civil Rights movement, is gaining steam as a popular cultural philosophy. The term itself was first coined by Mark Dery in the early 1990's.⁴ Defined more recently by Ytasha L. Womack, a speculative artist who literally wrote the book about it in 2013, "Afrofuturism is an intersection of imagination, technology, the future, and liberation." She then quotes Ingrid LaFleur who defines the concept as "a way of imagining possible futures through a black cultural lens."⁵ The concept spans many differing types of art. Think of the space-aged themes in the music and album art of George Clinton's Parliament-Funkadelic, the frenetic pop Africanism of Jean Michel Basquiat's paintings, the agency of black characters through time and space of Butler herself, and of course the modern film blockbuster *Black Panther*. These artists envision futures or alternate dimensions, or even alternate mind states, where people of color are of central focus, dominant of agency, technologically and intellectually advanced, and even emancipatory. Why does it not have more mainstream popularity? Would the reader find this author/teacher too bold as to accordingly wonder why we've only had one black president, and no women as of this writing? Black thought is subversive. It has been exalted as well as punished by death in our country's history. It is accepted more widely in different places, and still treated as second class or worse elsewhere. It is representative of the subjugated culture, and therefore in all its forms faces prejudice. To accept it more widely this country must do better, must try harder to what I will refer to in this unit as decolonizing its imagination. If colonization of a land originally inhabited by "others" has evolved into one dominated by said colonizer, then we must work as a culture to decolonize. In this unit we will attempt to do so starting with art, our minds, our imaginations. Can we imagine a world where black thought is not subversive, but simply regarded as thought? We'll try to first imagine a classroom where that is the case. Imarisha, in *Octavia's Brood*, laments that "decolonization of the imagination is the most dangerous and subversive form there is: for it is where all other forms of decolonization are born. Once the imagination is unshackled, liberation is limitless."⁶

The concept of Afrofuturism will be explored in more depth in the "Teaching Strategies" section.

Background and Objectives

"You don't have to be black to be blessed by black creativity." -Clement Price⁷

Kids love heroes. Superheroes have been popular among American children since the advent of the comic

book and before. Today, the immense popularity of Marvel Universe movies affirms this. Kids, and I notice this in my classroom, love superheroes. All of them. Almost as surely, they don't see many superheroes of color, or even main characters in comic, sci-fi or fantasy movies. If they do, they are in support roles (Samuel L. Jackson as Nick Fury in *The Avengers*), or worse - as static characters meant to support the more dynamic white characters. Billy D. Williams' Lando Calrissian in the *Star Wars* films is a criminal and smuggler, who may have been a main focus like Han Solo had he not lost the Millennium Falcon to him on a bet (portraying the only notable black person in the epic films also as a gambler).⁸ Warf, Michael Dorn's character in the popular 1990's tv show *Star Trek: The Next Generation* is one of the only Klingon people - a race marked by dark skin and anger issues - who can remain calm enough to present himself and be accepted in the uniform and role of a starship officer, the rest of whom are mostly white (with the exception of Lavar Burton as the blind Jordy).

Yes, students love their heroes, big and hyperbolic and flight-ready, and most of the heroes available to them are white or of European descent, indicative of a dominant culture constantly excluding them. How does this weigh on the mind and soul of a child of color who wants to dream and explore the stars and the future in art? Jemisin sums it up: "How terrifying it's been to realize *no one thinks my people have a future.*"⁹ She had to write her own fantasy novels to find black characters in that genre, as Butler did. If we don't forage through the library or bookstore or online database to find the stories that spark the imagination of children, it's not likely - if they're not purposefully looking for it - that they will simply stumble upon it. Therefore, they are prone to go on loving their white superheroes, without giving much thought to what that essentially micro-aggression is doing to their confidence or imagination regarding what they may accomplish. The damage spreads to white students who are also reinforced in the attitude that heroes - leaders, teachers, saviors - are all white. There are few instances where underrepresentation is not dangerous, but underrepresentation in the imagination of children can be among the most impactful.

I would like my students to discover heroes of color in speculative fiction and art, talk about why they're so scarce, brood on what values America has or lacks that lead to underrepresentation, look at all of this through a critical eye, and ultimately decide for themselves how much further they'd like to consider, study, enjoy, or even create their own products of imagination, whatever that may look like.

In order to do that, we must start with some important objectives as background to study race:

- One important objective for students will be to learn about and be able to utilize Critical Race Theory. An important tool for updating our understanding on issues of race in America, CRT allows us to view texts, media, history, even each other through a lens of understanding that race is important, relevant, and impactful in the decision-making of people in charge of education, books, politics, media, really everything.
- Another objective for students will be to reflect on colonialism and the dominant narrative of American culture, and what are the counter-narratives: what do they look like? How are they subversive or enlightening? Who can they reach? What is the impact?
- A third objective for a foundational background in race studies is to analyze the psychology of oppression, racial domination, and the culture these things yield. Colorblind racism impacts every aspect of education, particularly in an English classroom where we discuss literature, news media and current events, history, and how we personally confront and interact with these things.

With this foundational background in place, we will continue with objectives concerning representation in speculative fiction and a hallmark cultural product of that: Afrofuturism.

- Students will explore the varying definitions of Afrofuturism and be able to identify exemplar artists, their origin and work, and what each means to African-American agency and individualism, place in the power structure, and significance as speculative art in the American imagination.
- Students will be able to identify and analyze central figures in Afrofuturism including: Octavia Butler, Sun Ra, Jean Michel Basquiat, and other artists, writers, and scholars.
- Students will synthesize these studies by dwelling on the battle for representation in classic and modern culture.

Teaching Strategies Part 1: Foundations of Race Studies

Critical Race Theory

In order to appropriately appreciate the cultural limitations of popular speculative art, and the importance of Afrofuturism and black speculative fiction as part of a child's growing imagination, students will need to understand the concept of Critical Race Theory (CRT). Critical Race Theory presupposes that racial inequity exists, and views any text or even idea through the lens of critique based in social science. This presupposition carries along with it some important realities that must be recognized in order to appropriately move on. These are:

1. Critical Race Theory recognizes that racism is endemic to American life.
2. Critical Race Theory expresses skepticism toward dominant legal claims of neutrality, objectivity, colorblindness, and meritocracy.
3. Critical Race Theory challenges ahistoricism and insists on a contextual/historical analysis of the law...Critical race theorists...adopt a stance that presumes that racism has contributed to all contemporary manifestations of group advantage and disadvantage.
4. Critical Race Theory insists on recognition of the experiential knowledge of people of color and our communities of origin in analyzing law and society.
5. Critical Race Theory is interdisciplinary.
6. Critical Race Theory works toward the end of eliminating racial oppression as part of the broader goal of ending all forms of oppression.¹⁰

Essentially, and especially for our purposes, Critical Race Theory acknowledges deep-seeded American racism as part of most or all aspects of American culture. Using CRT, we view all popular culture with skepticism as to whether it is deconstructing or perpetuating the advantage of the dominant culture. This is the lens through which we view speculative art, the impact that underrepresented work has had on the American psyche, and the importance of Afrofuturism and black speculative art to the growing minds of our school children. These themes will be explored further in the "Classroom Activities" section.

Racial Domination and the Psychology of Oppression

The dominant racial ideology in America can be summed up as important to the racialized society we are through several indicators, outlined by Eduardo Bonilla-Silva: "(1) Accounting for the existence of racial inequality; (2) providing basic rules on engagement in interracial interactions; (3) furnishing the basis for actors' racial subjectivity; (4) shaping and influencing the views of dominated actors; and (5) by claiming

universality, hiding the fact of racial domination.”¹¹ Essentially, all factors that are symptoms of what is referred to as “colorblindness” – i.e., refusal to acknowledge and address structural racism, covered by the excuse of one not wanting or needing to “see” or acknowledge race.

Similar to using critical race theory, viewing pop culture, particularly imaginative speculative art, through this lens, we see the rooted dominant culture in most of what our children experience. By exploring better representation in speculative texts, we battle this colorblindness in allowing our students to imagine more equity in speculative futures.

Many modern sociologists are exploring “colorblindness” as a modern pervading form of racism. By claiming one “doesn’t see color” or that they do not act on racial considerations, one discounts and discredits the experience imposed upon some by the dominant culture.

Colorblind Racism

The Civil Rights era is over, and we live in “post-racial” America. This sentiment covers all manner of sins. It allows Americans of all races to recall a tough battle fought, and in many literal cases won, to advance the rights and privileges of people of color in this country. It allows us to assume that the stranger next to us on the street is not racist. It allows us to think the best of a teacher’s or even an entire academic institution’s intentions. It allows us to teach, learn, think, and do what we want where race is considered. This is because we have built a culture in this country firmly rooted in *not* considering race.

Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, author of *Racism Without Racists*, contends that this “new, more ‘civil’ way of maintaining and justifying racial considerations is a more formidable way of maintaining racial domination.”¹² Bonilla-Silva argues that these instances are institutional, and by and large *seem* to not be racist. In fact, they don’t even address race at all – so how *could* they be racist? This is the question that study of colorblind racism addresses. It confronts racist societal factors still at play but easy to ignore – such as discrimination in housing, and the continued segregation of schools (anyone who researches the racial makeup of urban versus suburban schools would have a hard time arguing against that). Bonilla-Silva sights an example of a woman who does not believe in busing. The woman accounts that people should invest in their own communities.¹³ Sure, who could argue with that? But that perspective expressly ignores the lack of opportunity in some communities, and the excess of it in others. Ignoring the racial lines of housing and neighborhood makeup and the desire for people to stay “in their place” is a form of racism that is not clear to me how it is so often discounted. Scrutinizing colorblindness is an important part of ensuring it somehow will be rooted out.

Therefore, the importance of appreciating other cultures and experiences goes far beyond a student or person being “well-rounded” culturally or intellectually. The understanding of others’ circumstances is essential to the possibility of racism being exposed and done away with, making good on the promises made by the Civil Rights era and expressly ignored since. “As one’s intercultural sensitivity increases, an individual’s worldview becomes more *ethnorelative*: one’s own culture is experienced within the context of other cultures.” Colorblind racism allows us to easily only view and experience life through our own culture, perspective, and privilege, and to believe that if we do not commit expressly racist acts, then we are not racist. It is essential to understand that teaching only literature of the dominant narrative is a racist act. Even though it does not expressly offend or debase literature of other or counter-cultures, ignoring it for inclusion of only dominant culture does. Therefore the second aspect of this curricular unit will be to scrutinize and include the budding and rich world of Afrofuturism.

Teaching Strategies Part 2: Teaching Race using Afrofuturism

Afrofuturism's Place in Modern Classrooms

The cultural impact of the 2018 film *Black Panther* cannot be understated. Americans like never before have an avenue in elite culture to explore an African nation advanced beyond the rest of the world. Most importantly, children of Afro and European decent alike are pondering a world where heroes can look like them, or not. They may even be advancing to cultural openness, and that is precisely what the cultural content aspect of this curricular unit is meant to facilitate through study of Afrofuturism.

Keeping in mind that this is not meant to fill a gap, as much as it is meant to inspire general inclusion and acceptance of all cultures as relevant and important, opposing the dominant cultural perspective of loyalty to and exclusive use of Canon literature. Another colorblind perspective we will work to do way with is that study of African culture is a specialization as opposed to a necessity, therefore condemning it to condescension. The following artists should be in every art history book, music curriculum, and literary anthology. As things currently stand, they might only be found in those of African-American studies, or other specialized as opposed to general studies texts, if at all.

Pillars of Afrofuturism to Teach Race and Anti-Racism: Butler, Basquiat, Sun Ra

The resources for examples of Afrofuturism in culture are virtually boundless. There is a book written on Kendrick Lamar and the speculative impact of his album *To Pimp a Butterfly* (link in "Teacher Resources" section), and justifiably so. From mid-20th century works to modern pop culture and blockbuster film, Afrofuturism has grown into more than a cultural movement, it is a genre. Combining the future with history in innovative and exciting ways, Afrofuturism presents a grand concept of African triumph, providing artistic outlet for students of color - and any student - to imagine futures of more civil equity. As an educator, one could draw on a vast universe of palpably impactful culture: art, books, music, essays, poems, speeches, films. For these purposes we will focus on three pioneers in three different mediums. In literature, we will look at selections from a science-fiction writer whose reputation is nearly hyperbole itself, the esteemed Octavia Butler. For art, we will focus on the enigmatic phenomenon Jean-Michel Basquiat, whose depictions of race, and what the famous Whitney exhibition called "Heroes and Saints" of significant African-American importance, shook up what the world would think and do with art, conversation and fashion. In music, we will focus on the self-proclaimed interstellar traveler and jazz-funk pioneer Sun Ra.

Sun Ra

What better place to introduce these concepts to students than with music? Where better to begin than Saturn? Modern students will not be unfamiliar with music conceptualizing space or transcendental philosophy necessarily: plenty of modern artists touch on said concepts, particularly Janelle Monae (who is mentioned again in the "Classroom Activities" section regarding these artists). But many may not know just to what extent classic American pop-funk-jazz artists like George Clinton and Sun Ra took the concept. Sun Ra claimed to have himself been abducted by ambivalent aliens to Saturn where he was encouraged to communicate to the world through his music. The music in question became a futurist jazz phenomenon, consistently incorporating themes of both ancient Egypt and outer space. Through his work, we see the juxtaposition of history with concepts of the future that are the hallmark of Afrofuturism.

In a 2018 feature on Sun Ra on Public Radio International, Afrofuturism is described by poet Eve Ewing as “the simple premise that black people are going to continue to exist into the future.” The simplicity lessens, according to Ewing, when describing a diasporic people who, particularly in America, have historically faced and indeed continue to face annihilation.¹⁵ For artists like Sun Ra and Octavia Butler, a desire to leave planet Earth is proudly betrayed. Afrofuturists connect the future and technology with history: the past, diasporic culture, injustice, as well as successes and dramatic human progress.

Describing on the same radio program the music of Sun Ra and George Clinton, Trisha Rose of Brown University relishes: “They... were almost like superheroes; like an alternative species of people of African decent were coming to tell you that basically things were okay.” She goes on to describe Afrofuturist musicians as those who create worlds through which people of color can imagine a place where they were not as disempowered.¹⁶ *This* works as a view through a lens of Critical Race Theory. Some may consider the music of Sun Ra or Parliament-Funkadelic as simply good music. Why bother reading too much into it? Wouldn't it be racist to consider it anything more than good funk and jazz? Yes, incidentally it would be racist. The music, costumes, world-building and culture of Sun Ra imagined a world of equality and progress that did not exist, can inspire those who would have it exist to make it so, and can be scrutinized as effective counter-culture.

Activities comparing and contrasting Sun Ra to modern artists can be found in the “Classroom Activities” section below.

Jean Michel Basquiat

Jean Michel Basquiat was a black American artist of Puerto Rican and Haitian decent whose heyday spanned the mid-1970's to late-1980's. While he died of a heroin overdose at the age of 27, his prolific output during his active years left the world with subversive, dichotomous work combining words and pictures, sarcasm and wit, social criticism and commentary on the black American experience. His art is frenetic and complex, at times looking like the notebook scribbling of a disturbed middle-school kid, while simultaneously demonstrating mastery of drawing, color, mixed-media, and facilitating anti-racist concepts. In his work “Molasses” (link to image in the “Teacher Resources” section), we can see a depiction of modern slavery (i.e., incarceration), with a robot looking on with a defeated look on its face: not even in the future will justice be righted. Even the title “Molasses” sounds like a reference to sugar cane which was harvested by slaves. Basquiat often depicted dichotomy, rich versus poor, old versus new, and often – as in this case – the technological versus the historical.

There is an analysis activity of Basquiat's “Molasses” in the “Classroom Activities” section below.

Octavia Butler

Butler was such a popular science fiction writer it almost feels erroneous to consider her work as part of the counter-culture. However, popularity does not discount – in fact it perhaps enhances – the currently subversive impact of Afrofuturist works (again consider the popularity of *Black Panther*). Any number of Butler stories could be scrutinized for these purposes. We will take a closer look at one of her more popular novels, *Dawn*, for which it has been recently announced director Ava Duvernay (13th, *A Wrinkle in Time*) will be directing a television show bringing the book to life. This is an essential example of Afrofuturism, focusing on the power, prowess, and presence of a woman of color who is the first human who can withstand coexistence with aliens. Flipping the script of black as “other” and contrasting the main character with a very alien race, Butler presents a character who not only navigates the alien world with poise and aplomb, but contemplates

consistently in subtext the juxtaposition to treatment of American slaves.

Lilith, who has lived through not only the tragic deaths of her husband and child but an apocalyptic nuclear war, awakes hundreds of years later on an alien spacecraft, where she is expected to adapt and reproduce to repopulate earth for the benefit of her alien captors and, according to them, what remains of the human race as well. The allusion to slavery is so palpable it's obvious, yet Lilith's journey feels fresh for seekers of speculative fantasy and cathartic African-American heroism. In *Dawn*, Butler juxtaposes historical black experience with a future with nothing but possibility, opportunity, and agency.

There is a quote analysis from *Dawn* by Octavia Butler in the "Classroom Activities" section below.

Throughout, the important focus should be that these are lost, as opposed to specialized, aspects of culture. We strive to understand that these hallmarks of Afrofuturism are as significant to our culture as anything in the Canon. They are not something to plug in as a missing piece, but something to understand as a puzzle piece, illuminating our students to aspects of culture that are by nature subversive, because the dominant structure of our society has relegated them to the sidelines for the comfort, wealth, and continued supremacy of a dominant race. Octavia can help us travel to places where that is not the case; where individual agency is attainable by anyone. Basquiat strived to juxtapose the mainstream with the subversive in order to contrast and illuminate the latter. Sun Ra, if you asked him, traveled himself to different planes in order to search out enlightenment. Following in his footsteps is imperative to antiracist pedagogy, and we don't even have to travel as far as Saturn: a bit further than the dominant narrative will do.

Classroom Activities: Anti-racist Pedagogy and Afrofuturist Art

Anti-Racist Pedagogy

The above sections highlight the important things to consider when navigating counter-culture, and especially when encountering dominant culture. Utilizing Critical Race Theory is important for both, therefore it might be powerful to start by scrutinizing a piece of Canon literature or art through the lens of Critical Race Theory. Utilizing the aforementioned precepts, it will probably be fascinating to see what you and your students find.

Following that experiment, it may come more naturally to address colorblind racism while reading through Butler, listening to Sun Ra, and appreciating the art of Basquiat, which we will do next.

Analyzing Quotes from *Dawn* by Octavia Butler

Students will read on their own and in class, and respond to appropriate journal entries (do-nows) covering the concepts the book addresses. For these purposes, I will highlight several quotes that I plan to analyze with my students as examples of the use of anti-racist pedagogy, and important Afrofuturistic concepts.

Quote 1: When Lilith first encounters the aliens who are holding her captive, she asks whether it is male or female. The response is: "'It's wrong to assume that I must be a sex you're familiar with,' it said, 'but as it happens, I'm male.'"¹⁷

This quote offers several points for analysis. For one, gender – another major signifier of otherness – is brought

up almost immediately, reminding us of the importance of perspective. Also, Lilith is a black character, and Butler is conveying to her reader that even when racism is taken off the table, sexism is still apparent, reminding us that counter-narrative is multi-faceted, and we must remain sensitive to many different considerations (and does it allude to any of her possible struggles as a black woman?). Also of note – might this be considered an early tribute to the struggle of trans people? Or, if not, it can certainly be compared to their modern struggle.

Quote 2: As Lilith grows to understand more about the aliens, she becomes more comfortable, albeit extremely cautiously. This does not stop them from attempting to “mate” her with another human captive. They set up a meeting under the guise to her of simply that: meeting. He tries to rape her, which she forgives based on his desperation from captivity, and tries to explain this to the aliens. Their response: “He was content with his. . .family until he met you.”¹⁸

We can jump right into the #metoo implications of blaming a woman for being attacked. Also, another clear allusion here is the alien captors as slave masters. They attempt to mate their two captives, and still believe they are justified in doing so, even after evidence to the contrary (the attack) is presented to them. What does it take for an oppressive culture to realize it is wrong? Generations? Centuries? Do they ever actually realize it? Are we living that truth today in America?

Quote 3: When discussing the merits of their own ways over that of humanity’s (now essentially extinct), the alien says to Lilith: “Your people contain incredible potential, but they die without using much of it.”¹⁹

Lilith herself broods on the irony of this comment, that humans often realize this as well yet do not strive to use more of our own potential. Through this analysis, and overall inclusion and equity of curricula, may we strive to do just that.

Analyzing “Molasses” by Jean Michel Basquiat

A link to an image of the painting is in the “Teacher Resources” section below. It can also be easily googled, and will of course be imperative for this activity.

This painting is rife for analysis using Critical Race Theory. Over a starkly pink background, it depicts a human-esque driver in a car carting two prisoners in a cage. While all three of these characters are brown, the prisoners are animal-esque. They drive off into the only gray section of the painting, accounting for about 5% of the background of the canvas – clearly driving off into something, perhaps the void of incarceration. Bringing up the rear of the cage-car is a robot. Fairly standard when one thinks of a robot, it stands out because of the sad look it has on its face.

Assuming that this work is addressing a society of racial ills, where – for example – black and brown men are incarcerated at a rate of one in three for lesser crimes (a statistic that may have increased to this number since Basquiat’s day), we can assume that whatever the race of the “officer” driving the car, the prisoners in the back are black men.

What, however, do we make of the robot? It is in no way clear what race it might be. Here is where we see this work as an exemplar of Afrofuturist art. The robot is the future, the prisoners the “past” (Basquiat’s present), and it is sad to see that the criminal justice system is still unbalanced.

This of course, as art, is all up for interpretation, which I will encourage my students to do through scrutiny,

written analysis, and class discussion.

Comparing and Contrasting Sun Ra’s Music with that of Modern Artists

The dominant American narrative in speculative fiction is that the future is white. As mentioned in the beginning of this curricular unit, this is apparent in many of the most popular works of fantasy and science fiction. Therefore Afrofuturism is still the counter-narrative: it makes apparent that black people will be a part of the future. Sun Ra dressed in outrageous space-aged costumes mixed with homage to ancient Egypt. This subverted modern (for the time) concepts of what an African-American should and could be, influencing modern musicians like Janelle Monae. The two are both mentioned in the radio feature highlighted earlier, and therein are two songs worth comparing and contrasting: *The Lady with the Golden Stockings* by Sun Ra, and *Sincerely, Jane* by Janelle Monae (also mentioned in the radio feature).

Catchy, calculated, and countering what was thought could be done with music, these songs are an opportunity to engage even the most disinterested student. Links to both songs are in the “Teacher Resources” section below.

The important thing to remember overall when attempting to help students decolonize the American imagination is that no matter what artists we decide to highlight, what we are teaching is that everyone deserves to imagine a future with people like themselves, whatever that may look like. In *Octavia’s Brood*, Imarisha finalizes the introduction to her wonderful collection of stories with poignancy that we can incorporate into teaching Afrofuturism: “We [African-Americans] are already science fiction walking around on two legs. Our ancestors. . . dreamed about a day when their children’s children’s children would be free. They had no reason to believe this was likely, but together they dreamed of freedom, and they brought us into being.”²⁰ If slaves were the earliest American speculative fiction writers, their descendants certainly deserve a representative place in what all our children learn today.

Teacher Resources

Book on Kendrick Lamar and Afrofuturism:

https://www.amazon.com/Afrofuturism-Cyclicity-Present-Kendrick-Butterfly/dp/1982990538/ref=tmm_pap_s_watch_0?_encoding=UTF8&qid=1564533978&sr=8-1

Image of “Molasses” by Jean Michel Basquiat:

https://images-na.ssl-images-amazon.com/images/I/71NrRblhQzL._SL1200_.jpg

Amazon entry for *Dawn* by Octavia Butler:

https://www.amazon.com/Dawn-Xenogenesis-Bk-Octavia-Butler/dp/0446603775/ref=sr_1_1?crid=3JJANKLA35CMH&keywords=dawn+octavia+butler&qid=1564534039&s=books&prefix=dawn+oct%2Caps%2C179&sr=1-1

PRI feature on Sun Ra and Afrofuturism: <https://www.pri.org/stories/2018-10-18/space-place>

Link to “Lady With the Golden Stockings” by Sun Ra: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dosCvq_Q24w

Link to “Sincerely, Jane” by Janelle Monae: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b_WhE7mBwK8

Notable Afrofuturist Artists

Literature

Octavia Butler, N.K. Jemisin, Nnedi Okorafor

Music

Sun Ra, George Clinton and Parliament-Funkadelic, Janelle Monae, Janet Jackson, A Tribe Called Quest, Erykah Badu, Kendrick Lamar, Outkast, Wu-Tang Clan, SZA

Art

Jean Michel Basquiat, Terry Adkins, Pedro Bell

Appendix: Addressing Common Core State Standards

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.10

By the end of grade 12, read and comprehend literature, including stories, dramas, and poems, at the high end of the grades 11-CCR text complexity band independently and proficiently.

By the end of this unit, students will have interacted with and analyzed literature that is complex, immersive, intellectual, and culturally diverse. Students will incorporate aspects of Critical Race Theory into the scrutiny of said texts, and will therefore have an even higher understanding and appreciation for its significance.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.3

Evaluate various explanations for actions or events and determine which explanation best accords with textual evidence, acknowledging where the text leaves matters uncertain.

This standard is an important one in this curricular unit. We will take close looks at events, actions, and stories, and evaluate whether they contribute to or impact colorblind racism, or the abolition of it.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.9

Integrate information from diverse sources, both primary and secondary, into a coherent understanding of an idea or event, noting discrepancies among sources.

A main point of this curricular unit is to utilize diverse sources, and to scrutinize what makes purposeful inclusion of them a necessary task. By the end of this lesson unit, students will not only be able to cite

important diverse texts, but indeed be able to tell what is the root of what makes them diverse, as opposed to simply part of our regular narrative.

Annotated Bibliography

Against the Odds: The Artists of the Harlem Renaissance. Dir. Amber Edwards. PBS, 2006. DVD.

Fantastic quote about African-American art and the value of art in general.

Bonilla-Silva, Eduardo. "The Structure of Racism in Color-Blind, "Post-Racial" America." *American Behavioral Scientist* 59, no. 11 (2015): 1358 - 1376.

Important source for outlining and giving examples of structural racism.

Butler, Octavia E. *Dawn*. New York: Warner Books, 1987.

Seminal work of black speculative fiction. Basis of much of the Teaching Strategies and Classroom Activities sections.

Castro-Atwater, Sheri A. "Color-Blind Racial Ideology in K-12 Schools." In *The Myth of Racial Colorblindness: Manifestations, Dynamics, and Impact*. Ed Neville, Gallardo, and Sue, 207 - 225. American Psychological Association, 2016.

Important insights into the concept of ethnorelativism.

Dery, Mark, Ed. *Flame Wars: The Discourse of Cyber Culture*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1994.

Work in which the term "Afrofuturism" is first used.

Ewing, Eve and Rose, Tricia. *Studio 360*. By Derek John. Public Radio International, December 12, 2008.

Fascinating interview about the meaning and significance of Afrofuturism and its leading musical examples.

Imarisha, Walidah. *Octavia's Brood: Science Fiction Stories from Social Justice Movements*. Oakland: AK Press, 2015.

Similar to the reason for the use of Jemisin, these stories are a substantive exemplar of the power and focus on minority speculative fiction, having authors of many races and backgrounds.

Jemisin, N.K. *How Long 'til Black Future Month?* New York: Orbit, 2018.

Basis of aspects of the literary text inclusion of the unit. Jemisin partly inspired by initiative to include black speculative fiction in my teaching curriculum.

Matsuda, Mari in Ryan and Dixson. "Rethinking Pedagogy to Re-Center Race: Some Reflections." *NCTE Review of Research* 84, no. 2 (November 2006): 175 – 183.

Imperative for the precepts of Critical Race Theory.

Womack, Itasha L. *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture*. Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 2013.

Basis for much of the information on the course of Afrofuturism as a cultural force.

Notes

¹ Jemisin, N.K, *How Long 'til Black Future Month?* New York: Orbit, 2018, page xii.

² *Ibid*, page vii.

³ Imarisha, Walidah, *Octavia's Brood: Science Fiction Stories from Social Justice Movements*, Oakland: AK Press, 2015, page 3.

⁴ Dery, Mark, Ed, *Flame Wars: The Discourse of Cyber Culture*, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1994, page 180.

⁵ Womack, Itasha L, *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture*, Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 2013, page 9.

⁶ Walida, *Octavia's Brood*, page 4.

⁷ *Against the Odds: The Artists of the Harlem Renaissance*, Dir. Amber Edwards, PBS, 2006, DVD.

⁸ Womack, *Afrofuturism*, page 5.

⁹ Jemisin, *How Long 'til Black Future Month?* page x.

¹⁰ Matsuda, Mari in Ryan and Dixson, "Rethinking Pedagogy to Re-Center Race: Some Reflections," *NCTE Review of Research* 84, no. 2 (November 2006): 175.

¹¹ Bonilla-Silva, Eduardo, "The Structure of Racism in Color-Blind, "Post-Racial" America." *American Behavioral Curriculum Unit 19.02.07*

Scientist 59, no. 11 (2015): 1362.

¹² Ibid, 1358.

¹³ Ibid, 1364.

¹⁴ Castro-Atwater, Sheri A, "Color-Blind Racial Ideology in K-12 Schools," In *The Myth of Racial Colorblindness: Manifestations, Dynamics, and Impact*, Ed Neville, Gallardo, and Sue (American Psychological Association, 2016), 218.

¹⁵ Ewing, Eve and Rose, Tricia, By Derek John, *Studio 360*, Public Radio International, December 12, 2008.

¹⁶ Ibid

¹⁷ Butler, Octavia E, *Dawn*, New York: Warner Books, 1987, page 11.

¹⁸ Ibid, 96.

¹⁹ Ibid, 22.

²⁰ Walida, *Octavia's Brood*, page 5.

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