“The Gospel According to Afrofuturism”
February 23, 2020
The Rev. Heather Janules

For a time, a billboard stood high above a neighborhood in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. White letters on a black background proclaimed, “There are Black People In the Future.”

The billboard was a piece of public art, installed by Alicia Wormsley, an artist whose work is part of the Afrofuturism movement.

The statement - “There are Black People In the Future” – echoes an observation from a very specific community. Anthropology teaches us that human beings began on the African continent. Throughout millennia, by natural migration and, more recently, through the sick machinery of slavery, African people spread across the globe. People of African descent live everywhere in the diaspora, as do a subset of the Black community. By this I mean – with authentic respect – nerds. To be clear, there is a nerd in the pulpit right now.

“There are Black people in the future” is an affirmation among science-fiction nerds who are also Black, in response to the mysterious absence of African-American characters in sci-fi films. If you think about it, the failure of vision on the part of media producers is strange. As Ytasha Womak observes, “even in the imaginary future, a space where the mind can stretch beyond the Milky Way to envision routine space travel, cuddly space animals, talking apes, time machines – [when] people can't fathom a person of non-Euro descent a hundred years [from now,] a cosmic foot has to be put down.”[1]

This simple declaration of existence – “There are Black people in the future” – has real-time, “this world” meaning too. Wormsley erected her billboard in a gentrifying neighborhood, a neighborhood losing many of its African-American residents and businesses. The billboard became controversial; Wormsley had to take it down. The literal erasure of what should be a simple statement of reality – “There are Black people in the future” – is perhaps a sinister reflection of ideas

[1] Womak, Ytasha. *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture*. (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 2013.) Cited in “On Orishas, Sankofa and the Imperative of Struggle: Spiritual Themes in Afrofuturism” by Josh Pawelek, Greenfield Study Group, April 29, 2019.

promoting African-American expulsion, throughout the past and very much in the present.

But it is not surprising that work by an Afrofuturist artist is received as an act of Black affirmation, resistance and resilience. Acknowledging how Black people have suffered and endured throughout history, drawing on this history and imagining a Black-centered future with authentic elements of hope are the hallmarks of Afrofuturism.

As I said before, I am a nerd, although more of a "church nerd" than a "sci-fi nerd." I am pretty tuned out to developments in popular culture. So I am grateful to my collegial study group for choosing Afrofuturism as the focus of our research and reflection last Spring, especially Josh Pawelek, whose paper, "On Orishas, Sankofa and the Imperative of Struggle: Spiritual Themes in Afrofuturism," is an important guide in today's reflection.

While exploring Afrofuturism as an outsider, I am inspired. Afrofuturism teaches all of us that when we face certain hopelessness, there are gifts from the past that help us conjure another world, a different outcome, a new way of being. For in the words of Walidah Imarisha, "whenever we try to envision a world without war, without violence, without prisons, without capitalism, we are engaging in speculative fiction. All organizing is science-fiction."[2]

The term "Afrofuturism" was first coined by white cultural critic Mark Dery in a 1994 essay, "Black to the Future." He defines the movement as "speculative fiction that treats African-American themes and addresses African-American concerns in the context of twentieth-century technoculture…"[3] Or, in less grad-school vocabulary, consider the title of an article by Heather Jones: "Being Weird and Black Doesn't Mean You are Interested in Being White."[4]

It was also Mark Dery who observed that the lived history of people from the African continent echoes common plots in science-fiction films and stories. Ordinary people are abducted against their will and taken to another place where they live lives as "the other," "strangers in a strange land." Subsequently, Black

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[2] Imarisha, Walidah. From the Foreword to *Octavia's Brood: Science-fiction Stories from Social Justice Movements*, Imarisha and brown, ed. (AK Press: Oakland, CA, 2015.)

[3] http://post-what.com/2014/09/what-is-afrofuturism-black-to-the-future-by-mark-dery/

[4] https://wearyourvoicemag.com/race/weird-black-doesnt-mean-youre-interested-white

writer and critic Greg Tate affirmed that the experience of living as a Black person in America resonates with science-fiction themes. In his words, "Black people live the estrangement that science-fiction writers imagine."[5]

As our music director John Kramer notes in the order-of-service, musician Herman Poole Blount, better known as Sun Ra, was a pioneer in Afrofuturism.[6] Along with creating genre-bending music, he and Joshua Smith wrote an Avant guard film, "Space is the Place," in which, through space- and time-travel African-Americans create a Black colony on another planet as Earth is destroyed.[7]

Another important founder of Afrofuturism is Octavia E. Butler, one of the few Black women science-fiction writers of her time. Her novel, *The Parable of the Sower*, was the first in a series, telling a dystopian tale. The country has descended into stark poverty, violence and deprivation in the wake of ecological disaster. There is a powerful drug gripping society which makes watching fires more gratifying than sex so arson, in pursuit of robbery or pleasure, is rampant. An authoritarian president promises to bring back jobs and "make America great again."[8] Many of the limited jobs are with companies that desalinize water but the living and working conditions harken back to coal-mining company towns, indentured servitude and downright slavery.

The main character is a teenager, Lauren Olamina. She lives in a walled compound with her family and a few others, trying to endure together. Her father instructs any member of the community old enough in skills needed for survival. He is a Baptist minister but the family faith does not resonate with Lauren. In private, she begins writing "The Books of the Living," scripture for the faith she creates, Earthseed.

In Earthseed, God is a verb. God is change. As Olamina affirms, "God is Trickster, Teacher, Chaos, Clay." This divine change is neither good nor bad. Human beings are subject to change and can be agents of change. To be a member of an Earthseed community, one must "change God" through positive intention. As

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[5] https://www.uvic.ca/victoria-colloquium/assets/docs/Black%20to%20the%20Future.pdf, p. 212, as cited in Pawelek, p. 1-2.
[6] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sun_Ra
[7] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Space_Is_the_Place
[8] https://www.newyorker.com/books/second-read/octavia-butlers-prescient-vision-of-a-zealot-elected-to-make-america-great-again

named in the reading, the overall goal of Earthseed is to prepare humanity for exodus to another planet, to grow and to begin again.

When chaos hits the family compound, Olamina and a few others become refugees and walk north. Along the way, fragile trust is made with fellow migrants and, through sharing Earthseed philosophies, the first Earthseed community is formed.

Sun Ra and Butler are just a few early artists in the history of Afrofuturism. And there has been contemporary growth of Afrofuturist works. As Josh Pawelek notes, in recent years Tomi Adeymi, author of *Children of Blood and Bone* and the action film "Black Panther" have become popular. One cannot watch "Black Panther" and have any doubt whether "there are Black people in the future."

Musician Janelle Monáe is also grounded in Afrofuturism. Her albums and videos tell the epic tale of Cindy Mayweather, an android who flees capture after committing the sin of falling in love with a human. The Cindy Mayweather story is told in non-sequential fragments, with scenes and ideas that echo the Underground Railroad and become metaphors for Janelle Monáe's present-day experience. In interviews, Monáe acknowledges the android as representative of "the other," those who live in "estrangement." As she recently proclaimed during her performance at the Oscars, Monáe is a "queer black artist." She began her number by singing, "We celebrate the art of storytelling – the misfits, the outcasts, the misunderstood, the voices long-deprived…"[9]

In Josh Pawelek's paper, he identifies spiritual themes of Afrofuturism: time travel and nature's magic.

Anyone who has read or watched science-fiction knows that traveling through time is a frequent plot element. Within Afrofuturism, time travel is also a common subject although not always through technology. Knowledge of history and connections with ancestors bring the past into the foreground. Butler's references to African American slavery in *Parable* and Monáe's fugitive narratives in futuristic storylines challenge linear time. Pawelek cites Ytasha Womak who affirms that "whether it is the concept of prophecy and speaking into the future

[9] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O6Rt06Xwl4w

or tropes of the past shadowing the present…many [Afrofuturists] speak as if future, past and present are one."[10]

Within Afrofuturism, this collapse of past, present and future has spiritual, redemptive and political dimensions. Imarisha and brown affirm that science-fiction is not as speculative as one might think. They write:

> For those of us from communities with historic, collective trauma, we must understand that each of us is already science-fiction walking around on two legs. …We think of our ancestors in chains, dreaming of 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.

Speaking to the present and future, they continue:

> We're responsible for interpreting their regrets and realizing their imaginings. We wish to continue the work of moving forward with their legacy.[11]

Another spiritual thread in Afrofuturism may be dear to many Unitarian Universalists: the power of nature. Josh Pawelek cites Adeyemi's *Blood and Bone* and Nnedi Okorafor's *Akata* series of books as works that draw heavily from the Yoruba religion, indigenous to Nigeria. These stories include many familiar elements of science-fiction: "flight, inter-dimensional travel, time-travel" and superpowers. Yet these experiences do not have human but mystical origins. Mark Dery identifies these sources of power as "technologies of the sacred."[12]

By grounding plot lines in Yoruba symbology, Afrofuturists claim abilities through pagan practice and belief, not just through scientific discovery. And reconnecting with the earth and one another is essential. In summation, Womak observes that:

> Afrofuturism is a home for the divine feminine principle, a Mother Earth ideal that values nature, creativity, receptivity, mysticism, intuition and

[10] Womak, Afrofuturism, cited by Pawelek, p. 5.
[11] Imarisha, Walidah. From the Foreword to *Octavia's Brood: Science-fiction Stories from Social Justice Movements*, Imarisha and brown, ed. (AK Press: Oakland, CA, 2015.)
[12] Pawelek, p. 3.

> healing as partners to technology, science and achievement…There's a widespread belief that humankind lost a connection to nature, to the stars, to a cosmic sense of self, and that reclaiming the virtues of the divine feminine will lead to wholeness.[13]

While I am not a member of the Black community, I am grateful to the Afrofuturist artists who offer us bold, brave and creative ways to liberate minds and spirits. For all of us have ancestors who are redeemed by our very existence and survival. Many of us have ancient faiths, practiced in the old country, close to the earth, that offer us spiritual possibilities. There are brave activists, working tirelessly to fight that which demeans human dignity and ecological health. And there are artists with imaginations beyond measure who can lead us in creating hope in hopeless landscapes. For 'without vision, the people perish.'

Last month, I attended a clergy meeting centered on the climate crisis. The day began reviewing what scientists anticipate as our local future – species loss, Boston neighborhoods underwater, a climate like current-day Georgia. Facing this bleak prediction, presenters asked asked how our congregations would address this "new normal" – practically and spiritually. There were no easy answers and little comfort in considering what is coming.

Since that meeting, I read Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower*. When Butler wrote this novel, a story of social disintegration and chaos brought on by a warming planet, it was set thirty years in her future, the year 2025. Butler's vision for what is coming and how human beings might respond in both destructive and life-giving ways is nothing short of prophetic.

After lunch in a church basement, we participated in a conversation led by the Rev. Mariama White-Hammond. Rev. White-Hammond is an African-American pastor to an emerging congregation, New Root AME Church which, although decidedly Christian, sounds rather Unitarian Universalist on its website: "We believe that everyone is beautiful with amazing gifts to offer the world…We welcome your beauty and your brokenness. We don't have all of the answers. But, we are committed to working together to become whom God calls us to be individually and as a transformative and just community."[14]

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[13] Womak, *Afrofuturism*, p. 104.

[14] https://www.newroots.church/who-we-are

Rev. White-Hammond recounted a meeting she attended with Boston officials. In that meeting of secular, civic leaders, one person made a spiritual observation: We will respond to the emerging climate crisis in three ways – mitigation, adaptation and suffering. The balance of these responses is up to us.

She went on to teach us important lessons, many echoing Afrofuturist wisdom. Don't just focus on what you are fighting but focus on what you are building. Imagine the world you want to save and create out of what we have now.

In an article about Rev. White-Hammond, I learned that her passion for environmental justice began about fifteen years ago when she worked with a youth organization in Roxbury. It was rewarding work but emotionally exhausting. Five young people in her program were shot, two fatally.

It was first a department-store orchid then an herb garden on her porch and then a community vegetable garden that helped her heal. "I was facing so much death," she recalls, "these things that were producing life became really important to me."[15]

Considering White-Hammond's philosophy, looking at the New Root website, I was not surprised to see that the congregation is sponsoring a city-wide book read of *The Parable of the Sower*. I was also not surprised to learn that New Root is not the only faith community promoting Butler's ideas. There are actual Earthseed communities, gathering and practicing its tenets together.[16]

The gospel White-Hammond seems to be preaching – engage the spirit of life to endure and transcend what we believe are certain limitations and inevitable suffering – is also echoed in The Books of the Living. In the words of Verse 42:

> We have lived before.
> We will live again.
> We will be silk,
> Stone,
> Mind,

[15] https://www.bostonmagazine.com/news/2017/08/20/mariama-white-hammond/
[16] https://godischange.org/2017/04/12/what-would-octavia-butler-have-thought-of-the-real-earthseed/

Star.
We will be scattered,
Gathered,
Molded,
Probed.
We will live
And we will serve life.
We will shape God
And God will shape us
Again,
Always again,
Forevermore.[17]

[17] https://godischange.org/the-book-of-the-living/