The Afrofuturist Poetry of Tracie Morris and Tracy K. Smith

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The genre of poetry, much like fiction, is a creative outlet in which authors explore varied ideas, images, and issues that audiences may then analyze, critique, and appreciate. What happens when poetry and technology, or poetry and science fiction collide? Generally, the incorporation of notions of the future, science, technology, and African American identity has been a space for fiction, film, art, and music. Those who study Afrofuturism (AF), a framework for interpreting the intersections of race and technology or science fiction, often concentrate on novels by Octavia Butler, the musical stylings of Parliament-Funkadelic, and films such as *I Am Legend* (2007) and *The Book of Eli* (2010). Indeed, there is a growing collection of works in various genres that lend themselves to Afrofuturist interpretations, yet scholars rarely place poetry in the conversations. Consequently, poets Tracie Morris and Tracy K. Smith incorporate elements of science fiction, technology, and African American histories and experiences in select poems; thus, their works offer important opportunities for reading poetry utilizing an Afrofuturist frame-

work.

What, though, is Afrofuturism? As a term, Afrofuturism began formally in Mark Dery's 1993 contribution to *South Atlantic Quarterly* (also edited by Dery), where he utilizes the term. In 1994, Dery edited the text *Flame Wars: The Discourse of Cyberculture* in which he re-released the article. Dery created the term "Afro-Futurism" to "describe African-American culture's appropriation of technology and [science fiction] imagery" ("Black to the Future: Afro-Futurism 1.0," 6). While Dery is credited with the phrase, much is owed to Alondra Nelson, who founded an Afrofuturism listserv in 1998; this was an online community where members discussed issues related to technology, racial identity, diaspora, activism, the future, and various other topics. Within this digital space and through its members, Afrofuturism developed as a theoretical perspective for identifying and analyzing the relationships between Black identities, technologies from before and beyond, and imaginings of the future and its possibilities.

Encouraging the continued development of Afrofuturism, Nelson edited a 2002 issue of the journal *Social Text* in which numerous scholars and authors detailed in articles, interviews, and poems, the significance and uses of AF. Tracie Morris contributed poems to that special issue of *Social Text* that are distinctively Afrofuturist, for they address concepts of dystopic futures, technologies, and Black identity. As Nelson notes in the introduction to the issue, Morris's poems reveal that she is "less than sanguine about technoscience—each poem conjures the affect of loss and deception—linking it not to the promise of bright new futures but to biological abominations, genocidal campaigns, and environmental catastrophe" (11). In opposition to Tracy K. Smith's poem "Sci-Fi," dis-

cussed below, where she envisions a future with opportunities, Morris foresees the disastrous affects of continued US racism, ostensible advancements in technology, and ecological devastation.

The use of an Afrofuturist lens to analyze the poems by Morris and Smith suggests that the genre of poetry allows a creative space for poets to address and challenge the real and imagined lives of African Americans in the past, present, *and* future (consider, for example, Octavia Butler's novel *Kindred*, published in 1979, in which the contemporary Black female protagonist travels back in time and, due to events in that past, creates a different future for herself). Science fiction authors have historically utilized the literary genre to address relevant societal, environmental, and global issues; Black science fiction authors such as Octavia Butler, Samuel R. Delany, and Nalo Hopkinson tackle the intersections of identities, including race, gender, class, and technology in their novels and short stories. Morris and Smith do similar work in poetic form. Taken together, Morris's and Smith's poems indicate that poets are contending with those theoretical and material issues apparent in Afrofuturist films, literary texts, artwork, and music.

When analyzed through an Afrofuturist lens, Morris's poem "AfroFuture—Dystopic Unity" details the potential impacts of a mechanized US future. Morris imagines a state of dystopic unrest and systematic control in which the consolidated power of white people in the US continues to negatively impact African American individuals and communities. Ideas of resistance are embedded in the poem, yet ultimately Morris leaves her audience questioning the (im)possibilities of a dystopic unity. Written from a first-person narrative perspec-

tive, Morris's thirty-three lines are rife with chilling images and ideas.

Morris centers "AfroFuture—Dystopic Unity" on forms of technological and physical control including the areas of speech and sustenance. The opening lines immediately establish language's place in this future: "My first word was an error / according to the machine I spoke it in." These lines recall a US history in which African peoples were violently stripped of their own languages and forms of communication, as well as the devaluation and dismissal of African American speech by white society (consider the heated debates surrounding Ebonics). A machine of the "Neural Network Noir" (4) demands conformity in language in order for individuals to function in this technological future, and this conformity is based on what those in power have determined to be 'correct' language that machines can identify and code.

Along with language, Morris envisions food as a method of control for US Black communities when she writes, from the narrator's perspective, "I was the first class to be spoon-fed the suspicious cereal" (7). This foodstuff is modified in order to "equalize Negroes with psychic self-correcting breakfast which would/ allow their leaders to auto-repair the rest of us" (23-24). Morris establishes a binary with "their leaders," and later "the rest of us," implying that US Blacks are targeted by whites in power through the dosages of cereal. "Auto-repair" as a result of ingestion of this cereal can, on the one hand, refer to the silencing of African American individuals who attempt resistance or rebellion, yet it also points to the prospective goal of this food: genocide. This possibility is compounded when read in relation to previous lines in which Morris describes the "bleached" (22) individuals who distrib-

ute the food in "a covert bell curve moment" (21). This cereal used against Black people by dominant whites becomes yet another tool of oppression when considered alongside historical atrocities from US enslavement, the forced sterilization of Black women, the Tuskegee syphilis experiments, and far too many instances in the past and present of police brutality against young Black men. Furthermore, Morris describes the sounds and drastic results of ingestion of the cereal when she writes, "'Crunch-crunch-crunch' they marched through the esophagus / the sarcophagi from us, rolling over" (10-11). Morris transforms the cereal into a personified, militarized weapon employed by whites to march down the throats of Black people, leading to ostensible compliance and death.

Morris's grim imagining of the future attends to topics that are relevant to Afrofuturist productions, primarily Black lives and experiences, visions of the future, and technology. Science fiction, as a genre, invites speculation about possible futures and alternate pasts as seen in literary works such as Octavia Butler's *Wild Seed* (1980), Nalo Hopkinson's *The Salt Roads* (2003), and Ishmael Reed's *Flight to Canada* (1976); Morris, utilizing the elements of science fiction within her poem, envisions a possible future where racism and classism prevail—a dystopia. In a science fiction move, Morris constructs a dystopic time when different technological methods are employed by whites to control and even kill Black people in the US. The "Neural Network Noir" (4) mechanically controls language while food technology, the cereal, controls minds and bodies. Morris's future is not outlandish, or even beyond imagining, when considered alongside Black experiences in contemporary and past times in the US.

Tracy K. Smith, in her 2011 Pulitzer Prize-winning collection *Life on Mars*, delves into topics similar to Morris, and certainly topics that are not commonplace in contemporary poetry—the future and outer space. Smith's assessment of the potential for the future is influenced by her late father's career as an engineer who worked on the Hubble Space Telescope. Smith, in an interview with Jascha Hoffman, noted that images from the telescope "make me feel like I am seeing the distant future, even though it is actually the distant past" (477). Smith's reflection about the telescope's seemingly futuristic views that are, in reality, glimpses of the past is reminiscent of Nelson's assertion that Afrofuturist artists and authors "create reflections on the African diasporic past and renderings of our possible futures. These are past-future visions" ("Afrofuturism: Past-Future Visions," 34). Smith imagines a space and time where harmony may exist amongst all peoples in "Sci-Fi," yet that future is dependent on changes that may only be achieved through drastic and revolutionary action in contemporary times.

While Morris's poem is dystopic in every sense, Smith envisions something closer to a utopic future in "Sci-Fi." In the poem, Smith describes the lack of boundaries that will exist in a future space age, where "There will be no edges, but curves/ Clean lines pointing only forward" (1-2). In her vision of the future, Smith identifies how categories such as "women" will fall away because the "distinction will be empty" (8). This is a future where current notions and constructions of gender identity will not exist, or will not be recognized as they are now. Smith's lines evoke elements of science fiction—a genre that contains numerous stories and novels that consider gender identity and societies built upon non-patriarchal values—as

she questions the ostensible categories that have, historically, divided individuals and communities along lines of identity.

When lines of distinction disappear, what is left? Smith argues that it is existence—an existence that includes longer life due to "popular consensus" (18), perhaps because only in a future society will life be a primary concern while health disparities, imprisonment, and homicide are no longer the prevalent factors leading to the deaths of Black people in the US. Smith, though, is not overt about the role of racial identity in her futuristic space age where the narrator describes living "Eons from even our own moon" (7). Whereas Morris constructs a future in which Black people continue to resist material and physical control by whites, Smith envisions a time when the oppressions of sexism, and possibly racism, no longer exist. In Smith's imagining, this future is finally "scrutable and safe" (21), perhaps only because individuals in this new time no longer inhabit our planet.

It is notable that in "Sci-Fi," though Smith addresses identity in terms of gender, she does not *directly* address racial identity within the realm of the "safe" future of her construction; as a result, readers may strain in order to view Smith's examination of Black identity in the future through an Afrofuturist lens. Ultimately, though, Smith's poem reflects ongoing conversations within Afrofuturist scholarship and certainly in the realm of digital studies broadly. Nelson addressed the debates surrounding racial identity and technology in 2002 when she noted that, from the perspective of neocriticism, "in the future the body wouldn't bother us any longer" and that technology "offered a future of wholly new human beings—unfettered not only from the physical body but from past human experience as well" (2). Nelson critiqued the notion that

technology and developments in the digital age meant we were approaching an ostensibly post-racial era in cyberspace. If racial identity is a line of distinction that will fall away in Smith's "safe" future, it is instructive to examine, and even critique, her poem through an AF lens, one that attends to and questions race and racial identity, alongside the future and technology.

Morris and Smith create poems with different futuristic outlooks, which may be a result of the spaces these poets occupy; Morris is a sound poet who has long been connected to other Afrofuturist thinkers and scholarship, while Smith is a print poet whose AF influences come from her upbringing and interests in science fiction. Morris participated in, and remains a figure studied within, Afrofuturist discussions and scholarship since Nelson began the Afrofuturist listserv in 1998. As part of the Downtown Arts Festival at New York University in 1999, Nelson "organized a series of panel discussions under the title 'AfroFuturism|Forum,' a critical dialogue on the future of black cultural production" where Morris presented" (Rambsy, "Alondra Nelson & Afrofuturism"). Morris's poem was published in the issue of *Social Text* on Afrofuturism edited by Nelson. Smith's poem, on the other hand, is published in collection *Life on Mars*. While Morris was directly influenced by those key moments in AF theory and scholarship, Smith was impacted by her father's work as an engineer on the Hubble Space Telescope and various science fiction works from David Bowie's futuristic song lyrics to novelist Arthur C. Clarke (Smith, "Notes"). Morris and Smith engage in different media for their poetry and their differing backgrounds in Afrofuturism inform their poems about the future.

Morris and Smith visualize divergent possible futures and these dissimilarities are compelling when read through an Afrofuturist lens, for the science fictional aspects of the poems encourage speculation. There are limitless possibilities in science fiction; therefore, Morris and Smith are able to expand on the complexities and difficulties of contemporary Black experiences, as in Morris's poem, or to dream of a "safe" future time that is free from identity constraints and complications, as in Smith's. Nelson writes that the "future is neither an uncritical embrace of the past nor a singular conception of what lies ahead. It's ours for the imagining" ("Afrofuturism: Past-Future Vision" 34). These poets reveal that it is just as possible to create future narratives within the genre of poetry as it is in fiction and film, and Morris and Smith establish a place for poetry within Afrofuturist discourse.

Though Morris and Smith diverge in their visions of the future, their poems are remarkably unique when considered through an Afrofuturist lens—who else is creating science fictional Black poetry? "Afrofuturism," as a "term of convenience to describe the analysis, criticism, and cultural production that addresses the intersections between race and technology" (Nelson, "Afrofuturism"), is too often used in relation *only* to literature, artwork, music, and film. This is not to dismiss the importance of Afrofuturist analyses in these areas, for there are scholars contributing vital work to continued conversations in these areas. Ytasha Womack's text *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture* (2013) is an example of such scholarship, as is Howard Rambsy II's "Beyond Keeping it Real: Outkast, the Funk Connection, and Afrofuturism," not to mention the wealth of work coming out on the music and aesthetic of singer, songwriter, and perform-

er Janelle Monáe. Yet within the various conversations occurring related to AF, a pervasive silence surrounds poetry. Morris and Smith are voices amidst that silence and their unique, imaginative, and thought-provoking poems can catalyze important conversations regarding Afrofuturist theory, the uses and relevance of science fiction, and perhaps most importantly —the necessity of Black poetry and its creative possibilities for the past, present, and future.

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