

Afrofuturism/Chicanafuturism

Fictive Kin

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I open this essay with a confession: I was a nerd when I was a kid and I expressed my nerdiness most clearly as a science fiction fan. I stood in line for hours to see *Return of the Jedi* the day it opened. Ewoks notwithstanding, I truly enjoyed this film. I also spent many an afternoon in my parents' backyard with my sisters, friends, and cousins reenacting scenes from our favorite movies and TV shows. We pulled apart transistor radios and stuffed their entrails into our socks to mimic the Bionic Woman and we held a fraying tennis racket over our faces to play the role of her formidable nemesis, the fembot. A rusty shopping cart, boosted from a supermarket parking lot, doubled as the Millennium Falcon and an old *olla* my mother had used for cooking beans was transformed into Darth Vader's helmet.

Nobody told us that girls, much less Mexican girls, weren't supposed to like science fiction. Undeniably, few if any of the characters in the mainstream science fiction films and television programs of the 1970s and early 1980s looked like us. As the African American science fiction writer Octavia E. Butler pointed out, *Star Wars* featured "every kind of alien . . . but only one kind of human—white ones" (Beal 1986, 17). Sadly, only Ricardo Montalbán's Khan and *Blade Runner*'s Gaff, played by our homie Edward James Olmos, resembled us. Moreover, there was no mistaking me for any of the good guys—in the strictest sense of "guy." Yet, despite the genre's androcentrism and overwhelming whiteness, I found pleasure and meaning in science fiction. It beckoned me to imagine a world—indeed a universe—beyond the freeways, strip malls, and smog-alert days of my Southern California childhood.

More than mere escapism, science fiction can prompt us to recognize and rethink the status quo by depicting an alternative world, be it a parallel universe, distant future, or revised past. Good science fiction re-presents

the present or past, albeit with a twist. It tweaks what we take to be reality or history and in doing so exposes its constructedness. For this reason, the genre has proven fertile ground for a number of black and feminist writers, artists, and musicians, from Edgar Arceneaux to Marion Zimmer Bradley. These innovative cultural workers have transformed what was once considered the domain of geeky white boys into a rich, exciting, and politically charged medium for the interrogation of ideology, identity, historiography, and epistemology.



Science fiction lends itself easily to stories by and about people of African descent in the New World. As cultural critic Mark Dery has noted, “African Americans, in a very real sense, are the descendants of alien abductees; they inhabit a sci-fi nightmare in which unseen but no less impassable force fields of intolerance frustrate their movements; official histories undo what has been done; and technology is too often brought to bear on black bodies (branding, forced sterilization, the Tuskegee experiment, and tasers come readily to mind)” (1993, 736). Works of literature, film, art, and music that address the relationship of black people to science, technology, and humanism have been grouped beneath the rubric of Afrofuturism.¹ These texts use science fiction themes, such as abduction, slavery, displacement, and alienation, to renarrate the past, present, and future of the African diaspora.

Butler’s *Parable of the Sower* was the first Afrofuturist work I read, and in the mid-1990s it rekindled my passion for science fiction, which I had abandoned in an effort to be cool once I started high school. This 1995 novel offers a fairly common sci-fi scenario: it is set in the year 2024 in a Southern California plagued by drought, pollution, and economic crisis. However, the protagonist, Lauren Olamina, is like no other I had encountered in science fiction, or in any other literary genre for that matter. She is an African American teenager afflicted with “hyperempathy,” a condition that causes her to experience others’ physical sensations as if they were her own. After a gang of marauders kills her family and destroys her home and community, she heads north in search of water and employment. Along the way, she picks up other refugees, some of whom are fugitive slaves.

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Slavery—past and present—figures prominently in many of Butler’s novels. As she travels north, Lauren bears a strong resemblance to Harriet Tubman and refers to her group as “the crew of a modern underground railroad” (Butler 1995, 268). The protagonist of Butler’s 1979 time-travel novel, *Kindred*, is a young African American who is catapulted from her home in Pasadena in the late twentieth century to a plantation in antebellum Maryland. *Wild Seed* (1980) is about a 300-year-old West African woman with superhuman powers who is brought to North America as a slave in the late seventeenth century. And in *Dawn* (1987), aliens abduct the black heroine with the intention of repopulating a postapocalyptic Earth by breeding with her and their other human captives.

These novels represent only a portion of Butler’s impressive oeuvre. Before her untimely death in 2006 at the age of 58, she had just published her thirteenth book. She had also won a MacArthur fellowship and the prestigious Hugo and Nebula awards. The best of speculative fiction (an umbrella term that encompasses science fiction and fantasy), her novels and short stories simultaneously present the new and the familiar. They are about upheaval, migration, estrangement, tactical subjectivity, coalition, and survival, themes that resonate in narratives about African American life and culture.² I have found them, along with works by Samuel R. Delany, Deltron 3030, Nalo Hopkinson, Walter Mosley, and Sun Ra (to list just a handful of writers and musicians), to be effective tools for teaching the history of the African diaspora in North America, linking theories of race, class, gender, and sexuality, and elucidating the relationship of African Americans and other people of color to the discourses of modernity.



The concept of Chicanafuturism, which I introduced in *Aztlán* in 2004, borrows from theories of Afrofuturism (see Ramírez 2004). Chicanafuturism explores the ways that new and everyday technologies, including their detritus, transform Mexican American life and culture. It questions the promises of science, technology, and humanism for Chicanas, Chicanos, and other people of color. And like Afrofuturism, which reflects diasporic experience, Chicanafuturism articulates colonial and postcolonial histories of *indigenismo*, *mestizaje*, hegemony, and survival.

While it is indebted to Afrofuturism, the concept of Chicanafuturism was also inspired by the work of New Mexican artist Marion C. Martinez. I first saw Martinez’s dazzling sculptures and wall hangings at the show *Cyber*

Arte: Tradition Meets Technology, held at the Museum of International Folk Art in Santa Fe in 2001. The Catholic images she fashioned from discarded computer components, like circuit boards, disks, wires, and chips, prompted me to rethink the relationship of Chicana/o cultural identity and cultural production to science, technology, and progress.

Martinez's artwork illuminates the dynamism and malleability of cultural products and practices as it exposes the impact of science and technology on the people of the upper Río Grande Valley. She has found inspiration not only at a dump at Los Alamos National Laboratory (the origin of some of the materials that have ended up in her pieces), but also from New Mexico's esteemed *santo* tradition and from pre-Columbian Mesoamerican imagery. Yet, where santos (saints and other Catholic icons) have historically been carved from wood and those colossal Olmec heads were sculpted from stone, her self-labeled "mixed-tech" (think *Mixtec*) media wall hangings and "AzTechna" (a play on *Aztec*) brooches are made of machine parts.³ These works simultaneously speak of New Mexico's unique history as a dumping ground for high-tech trash, including radioactive waste, and the planet's growing pile of so-called e-waste.⁴

Instead of applauding science and technology or condemning them altogether, Martinez's work shows how they have transformed Native American and Hispanic life and culture—and how one self-described "Indio-Hispanic" woman has transformed some of the tools of science and technology. Like black people, especially black women, Chicanas, Chicanos, and Native Americans are usually disassociated from science and technology, signifiers of civilization, rationality, and progress. At the same time, many Chicanas, Chicanos, and Native Americans have been injured or killed by and/or for science and technology. Here, I'm thinking of forced sterilizations, environmental racism, and Jared M. Diamond's (1997) provocative argument about the important role guns, germs, and steel played in the European colonization of the New World. All too often, we are linked to savagery, carnality, intuition, and passion, and we are fixed in a primitive and racialized past. The future, in contrast, is generally imagined as white, as many of the science fiction movies and TV shows of my childhood made evident. More recently, information technologies such as the Internet have prompted some cultural critics to celebrate the present and imminent future as "placeless, raceless [and] bodiless" (Nelson 2002, 1). Already, people of color have been erased from the future, just as many of us were excised from narratives of the past and remain hidden from view in the barrios, ghettos, reservations, and prisons of the present.

By appropriating the imagery of science and technology, Chicanafuturist works disrupt age-old racist and sexist binaries that exclude Chicanas and Chicanos from visions of the future. Examples include Yolanda M. López's 1988 logo for the Chicana feminist organization *Mujeres Activas en Letras y Cambio Social*, which depicts a pre-Columbian goddess at a desktop computer; Alma López's 2006 update, *La Luchadora*, in which a young, athletic brown woman cradles a laptop; and the collaborative projects of the MeChicano Alliance of Space Artists (M.A.S.A.) (fig. 1).⁵ At the same time, some of the most powerful Chicanafuturist works, such as Martínez's *santos* and Guillermo Gómez-Peña and Roberto Sifuentes's performances as *El Naftazteca* and *El Cybervato*, throw into question the link between science, technology, civilization, and progress.⁶

In addition, Chicanafuturism interrogates definitions of the human. El Teatro Campesino's *acto Los Vendidos*, first performed in 1967 and thus one of the earliest examples of Chicanafuturism, offers a more expansive definition of "human" as it criticizes racist and classist perceptions of Chicanos and Mexicans, especially Mexican workers, as automatons. Similarly, Gloria Anzaldúa's 1987 theory of "alien" consciousness endeavors to undo the legacies of patriarchy, homophobia, and white supremacy in the United States by rejecting Enlightenment epistemology and ontology, as represented in great part by empiricism and the Cartesian subject.⁷

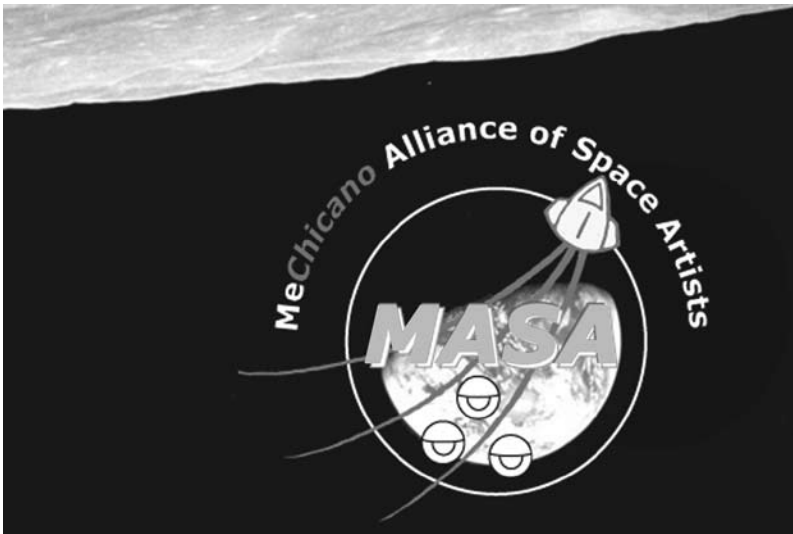


Figure 1. Luis Valderas, detail of logo for MeChicano Alliance of Space Artists, 2007. Reproduced by permission of the artist.

Finally, Chicanafuturism defamiliarizes the familiar. Like good science fiction, it brings into relief that which is generally taken for granted, such as tradition, history, or the norm, including normative gender and sexuality. Martínez's Catholic icons distort the santo tradition of which they are still a part. Set in the near future in the border region between the independent nation of Aztlán and Gringolandia (the former United States of America), Cherríe Moraga's play *The Hungry Woman: A Mexican Medea* (2001) reinterprets ancient Greek and Mesoamerican myths as well as the promises and pitfalls of Chicano cultural nationalism. And Laura Molina's 2004 painting *Amor Alien* (fig. 2) offers a sci-fi riff on mid-twentieth-century Mexican calendar art. Like Anzaldúa's theory, it points to the alien as a symbol for Chicana and Latina sexuality.⁸

Taken as a whole, these works show that science fiction is just as well suited for Chicanas and Chicanos as it is for African Americans. Some, like *Amor Alien*, are clearly science fiction. Yet for others, such as *Los Vendedidos* and Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera*, the connection to science fiction is probably less apparent at first. Theories of Afrofuturism have taught me to see cultural products that would not necessarily be classified as science or science fiction, like the music of Parliament and Midnight Star, as, or at the very least through the lens of, science and science fiction. These theories have inspired me to ask: What happens to Chicana/o texts when we read them as science fiction? To Chicana/o cultural identity? And to the concepts of science, technology, civilization, progress, modernity, and the human? These are the questions Chicanafuturism offers and confronts.



I no longer hide my passion for science fiction, and I have been able to channel it into a course I've developed on black speculative fiction. My students and I discuss a variety of texts, media, and concepts, such as the front and back covers of Earth Wind & Fire's 1977 album *All 'N All*, Jewelle Gomez's *The Gilda Stories* (1991), Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham's (1992) feminist theorization of the metalanguage of race, Zola Maseko's 1998 film *The Life and Times of Sara Baartman: The Hottentot Venus*, and Stuart Hall's (1994) configuration of the two vectors of a diasporic black cultural identity. Each year there are new works to teach and I have a hard time deciding how to rearrange the syllabus so that I can squeeze in just a little bit more. Nonetheless, I'm repeatedly asked by colleagues if my students and I have enough to talk about in my course. I bristle when I hear this

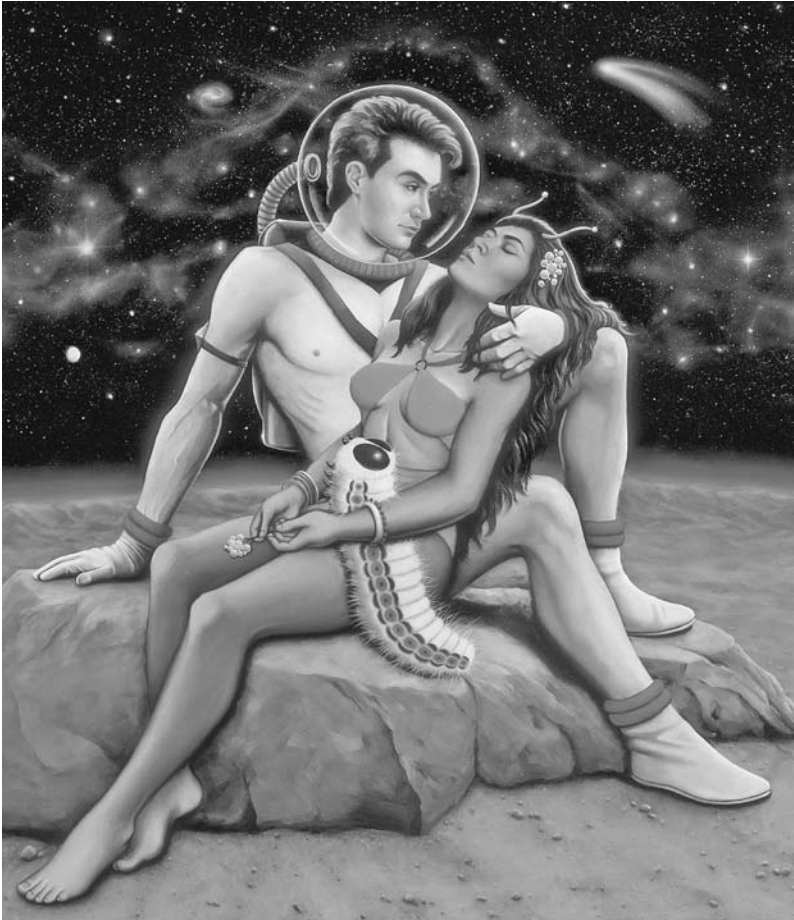


Figure 2. Laura Molina, *Amor Alien*, 2004. Oil, fluorescent enamel, and metallic powder on canvas, 49 x 37 inches. Reproduced by permission of the artist.

question, in great part because I believe that it's motivated by the racist assumption that black people have no connection to science, technology, and science fiction.

Although most of my students enjoy the readings, especially the fiction, I've decided that I must change this course radically if I'm going to continue to teach it. During the first weeks of the quarter, the course introduces the students, many of whom are juniors and seniors and the majority of whom are white, to the concepts of modernity and humanism. Among other things, we discuss the Atlantic slave trade, *Plessy v. Ferguson*, eugenics, and

the Tuskegee experiment. I believe that many of my students benefit from my lectures and our discussions and that the works we study are more than simple entertainment. However, I've grown increasingly uncomfortable delivering lectures on the objectification and abjection of black bodies in a classroom in which there's a pronounced absence of black students, a visible reality at the University of California in the wake of the passage of Proposition 209. Unable to resolve this paradox singlehandedly and in the immediate future, I've decided to change the focus of the course. Instead of emphasizing black speculative fiction, the course will take a more comparative and polycultural approach. We'll study black speculative fiction and theories of Afrofuturism alongside Sherman Alexie's 2007 time-travel novel *Flight*, Karen Tei Yamashita's magical realist tale *Tropic of Orange* (1997), William Gibson's post-9/11 technothriller *Pattern Recognition* (2004), and Alfonso Cuarón's 2006 film adaptation of P.D. James's dystopian novel *The Children of Men* (1992). In addition, we'll read science fiction from the so-called developing world, a site of booming offshore industrialization and technological experimentation in the early twenty-first century. I realize that by widening the course's perspective, I'll lose the specificity that I worked hard to hone over the years. Moreover, I understand that altering the focus of the course won't make more students of color appear out of thin air. Still, I maintain hope that the course's new focus will highlight the importance and expanding influence of Afrofuturism and the ties that bind the peoples of the aptly named New and Old Worlds.

Notes

1. I take my definition of *Afrofuturism* from <http://www.afrofuturism.net/> and the special issue of *Social Text* on Afrofuturism, in particular Alondra Nelson's introduction, "Future Texts" (2002).

2. A "tactical subjectivity" is dynamic and flexible as opposed to fixed or essential. It refers to an active and self-conscious process of identification rather than to a static and given identity. Feminist scholar Chela Sandoval coined this term in her landmark essay "U.S. Third World Feminism: The Theory and Method of Oppositional Consciousness in the Postmodern World" (1991).

3. For more information regarding Martínez's mixed-tech media works and AzTechna accessories, see <http://www.marionmartinez.com/home.php>.

4. A misleading term if ever there was one, *e-waste* does not refer to spam (electronic junk mail) or the virtual in any way. Rather, it refers to discarded

information technology tools such as computers and cell phones, neither of which decompose rapidly or safely.

5. According to its mission statement, the MeChicano Alliance of Space Artists seeks to “establish an awareness of outer space as an integral part of the Chicano(a) ModernMythos/Reality/Iconography.” The first M.A.S.A. show, *Project:M.A.S.A. #1*, took place at the Gallista Gallery in San Antonio, Texas, in October 2005. More recently, M.A.S.A.’s third annual exhibit opened at San Antonio’s Centro Cultural Aztlán on September 14, 2007. For more information about M.A.S.A., see <http://www.projectmasa.com/index.html>.

6. Regarding Gómez-Peña and Sifuentes’s performances as El Naftazteca and El Cybervato, see Foster (2002).

7. Regarding Anzaldúa’s theory of alien consciousness, see Anzaldúa (1987). For an extended discussion of this theory and its relationship to science fiction, especially Butler’s work, see Ramírez (2002).

8. *The Hungry Woman* received its first staged reading in 1995 at the Berkeley Repertory Theater in Berkeley, California (Moraga 2001, 5). See Ramírez Berg (1989) for a reading of mainstream science fiction films that collapse the alien with the Hispanic immigrant and/or Third World mother.

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