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Essay – Afrofuturism and Black Radical Love

I dedicate this essay to the late Chadwick Boseman for his revolutionary portrayal of T'Challa in Black Panther (2018) which has brought joy to Black children (and the older nerds as well). I also dedicate this essay to all those who have lost their lives to police brutality – your memory lives within us, and we continue to forge a future to honour you and to make sure that no one else is robbed of their lives in the ways that you have been.

In this essay, I will be analyzing the intersection of Afrofuturism and Black radical love. I will examine whether, when combined, these two ideologies allow for the creation of alternate narratives and mechanisms of cultural production in Black popular culture. Furthermore, I will examine how the intersection of these two concepts can be used as a mechanism to dismantle and rearticulate Blackness outside of the confines of racism and counter hegemonic discourses. I will argue that the intersection of Black radical love and Afrofuturism within Black popular cultural texts fosters the imagination and creation of a different society, one not predicated on the dehumanization of Black people. Finally, I will investigate the possibility of cooptation of Afrofuturism and Black radical love by hegemonic discourses within Black popular culture, specifically within the realm of capitalist media production, and how this can be addressed.

To understand the intersection between Afrofuturism and Black radical love, these concepts must first be defined. Maynard argues that "Afrofuturism provides us with new ways of rethinking and redefining the past, present and future; it allows for historical methodologies fusing myth, science fiction, and realities of black oppression and resistance" (33). Afrofuturism,

as I will discuss in more detail further on, is about defining Black life outside of the confines of the current systems of domination. Yet, Afrofuturism is not about ignoring or discarding the realities, both past, present and future, of systems of domination. It is about reclaiming what these systems have and continue to deliberately erase and finding alternate meanings of Blackness and of the world adjacent to these systems, in order to demolish them, all the while not forgetting their painful legacies. The power of Afrofuturism lies not only in creating alternate narratives to those imposed by these systems of domination, but, by doing so, being able to come to terms with and make sense of the realities faced by Black people in the past, present, and future (Aghoro 339).

An important component of Afrofuturism is the concept of chronopolitics, wherein the histories of resistance of the past inform and shape imaginations and creations of radical futures (Maynard 29). Practicing chronopolitics can be understood as 'acts of inheritance', which honour and value the contributions of our ancestors (Dotson 40, 42), which have made it possible for us to exist today and are invaluable to the creation of our futures. Both of these concepts call for an understanding of and respect for the Black radical tradition, which encompasses all acts of Black resistance and liberation (Maynard 34) – those of our African ancestors of the near and far pasts, of our Afro-diasporic ancestors, and of all Black peoples today, and a commitment to its continuity. Afrofuturism is an extension of the Black radical tradition through the practice of chronopolitical acts of inheritance.

What is Black radical love? As described in my presentation on "Love as the Practice of Freedom*"*,

> "hooks argues that [Black radical] love is essential to liberation, and that without it, efforts towards fighting oppression will fail. She examines how systems of domination are inherently violent, and thus function as the antithesis of love. She argues that an ethic of love counters our unintentional conscription into these systems. She defines [Black radical] love outside of the categorization of capitalism and its inherent ties to the violence of systems of domination as ""the will to extend one's self for the purpose of nurturing one's own or another's spiritual growth"" (hooks 247)" (François-Kermode 1).

Black radical love is not just a feeling, it is an action, a political task (Moore 325). Moore argues that "Black radical love is a practice—a ritual, one must take up daily. It is a practice of protecting Black life and emptying ourselves of the death-dealing practices of misogyny; trans and queer antagonism; ableism; elitism; ageism; and any other act of lovelessness that aids in the killing of Black people's spirits/bodies" (Moore 326). Black radical love is indelibly tied to the struggle for freedom and liberation. Thus, it is also a manifestation of the Black radical tradition.

How do Afrofuturism and Black radical love intersect? I posit that the commitment to a future that centers Black people is, in and of itself, an act of Black radical love. If Black radical love is a dedication to liberation, to anti-oppression, then it logically follows that it is also a dedication to a better future: "Black radical love not only anticipates liberatory Black futures, but also leans into such futures" (Moore 328). If Afrofuturism is the imagination of futures for Black peoples, it is demonstrably tied to a radical love and commitment to the survival and prosperity of Black peoples.

The processes of chronopolitics, acts of inheritance and the Black radical tradition are tied to Black radical love as well. Recovering the epistemologies of resistance of our ancestors, committing to acknowledging their humanity, recognizing their roles in building the society we have today and in allowing for the survival of Black people now, is choosing to love those who were dehumanized, erased, reduced in the collective memory of society as 'slave', 'n*gger', etc (McNeilly and Ford-Smith 34). It is allowing their lives, their efforts towards survival and liberation, and everything they were outside of the confines of constructed race, to exist today and to help build tomorrow. Reclaiming our own epistemologies and our own power in present day is choosing to look beyond the confines of Blackness as it relates to White supremacy, beyond Blackness as synonymous with inferiority, violence, and death.

Thus, the power of Afrofuturism and Black radical love resides in part in articulating Blackness outside of the confines of racism. The current systems of domination have created and shaped race within the framework of the explicit dehumanization of Black people, historically, for the purpose of enslavement: "Black peoples' bodies and, indeed, our very existence have been reductively figured as chattel, machine, fungible commodity and monster" (Maynard 30). This has engendered a widespread understanding of Blackness outside of the confines of what is considered to be 'human' and has led Black people to continue to be dehumanized well beyond slavery to this day. Furthermore, within White supremacy, the Black person is constructed in direct inferior relation to Whiteness (Fanon 257). A prominent way in which this inferiority is enacted is through the erasure of customs, traditions and history (Fanon 258). Without this historicity, the Black person becomes a hollow vessel capable of being categorized as inferior. This erasure of history and culture causes Black people to lose an understanding of themselves

outside of the dominant narrative of inferiority imposed upon them. By erasing Black histories and reducing Blackness to inferior, White supremacy not only steals our pasts, it also steals our futures (Fanon 264). If we are not capable of understanding ourselves through a framework that is not predicated upon our dehumanization, we cannot create a better future for ourselves wherein we are no longer inferior.

Through chronopolitical acts of inheritance, Afrofuturism disrupts these colonial White supremacist tactics and allows us to center ourselves within historicities and frameworks not predicated upon our inferiority. When we reclaim our pasts we reclaim our humanity, and recover understandings of ourselves beyond inferiority. Through Black radical love we are able to imagine ourselves as so much more than the dehumanized racial category placed upon us and create futures that do not belong to White supremacist frameworks at all. Afrofuturism challenges this dehumanization in two ways: by locating Blackness outside of the 'human' without locating it within inferiority but rather within a post-human that honours Blackness wholly (David 697), and by reimagining the category of 'human' altogether. Yet, Afrofuturism and Black radical love do not call for a post-racial or raceless conceptualization of Blackness (David 697). They demand that we love all that we are, including our location within this framework and how it has shaped Black peoples, and take that, as well as our desire to be more, to flourish, to imagine ourselves beyond the bounds of Western notions of 'humanity', in order to build something new, a future where we can be free.

Through Black popular culture, Afrofuturism allows us to imagine Blackness creatively, without having to navigate the realities of Blackness – the stereotypes, the violence, the death. It allows us to practice and theorize "becoming black on black terms" (Maynard 42). Afrofuturism

is indelibly tied to artistic production: "Afrofuturism is the injection of futurity, fantasy, and technology in the arts of Africa and the African Diaspora (...) [it is] a mechanism for understanding the real world situations of oppression in the contemporary world in the context of the ever-present past, while charting the future situation through the arts" (Hamilton 19).

Black radical love is also a prominent feature of Black popular culture. Black radical love, like Afrofuturism, is a commitment to shaping and seeing ourselves differently and thus rearticulating Blackness outside of the confines of racism. An essential tool in this process is the creation of different narratives. Challenging hegemonic narratives of Blackness is instrumental in the possibility to see ourselves as more than the normative associations of Blackness, and thus love ourselves as whole, beautiful human beings with infinite possibilities now, in the past and in the future. Black popular culture is an important space in the creation and dissemination of such narratives, and in challenging hegemonic narratives. Thus, Black popular culture is a valuable site for the articulation of Afrofuturism and Black radical love.

Black popular culture is a space where Black histories that have been and continue to be erased can be recovered, as within the framework of chronopolitical acts of inheritance. It is also a space where histories that have been deliberately misconstrued and wrongly relayed by journalistic sources for the benefit of systems of domination can be reclaimed and told by Black people. An example of this is the television series *When They See Us* (DuVernay), that relays the history of the Central Park Five. An integral part of reclaiming this story is reclaiming the humanity of these five black men who were reduced to criminals by mainstream news media. Thus, Black popular culture can also be an extension of the Black radical tradition. The reclamation of stories of the past liberate our predecessors from the chains of White supremacy,

which in turn offers us a path towards radical love and allows us to map Afrofutures (Maynard 43). When Black popular culture reshapes narratives by reclaiming past events, it allows for the possibility to imagine new perspectives, to break away from the mould of White supremacist thought. (Maynard 34)

The importance of acts of inheritance in Black popular culture is not limited to reclaiming past histories. It is also in deliberately creating narratives for future generations (Dotson 40). By understanding the value of past Black radical traditions, cultural creators commit to recognizing that their work will one day be inherited and used to make sense of the world. By doing so they commit to conceptualizing the present in a way that honours Black people in the now. They also commit to the creation of a better future, to loving those that will come after them before they have even landed upon this Earth, and to trusting that they will inherit cultural texts to make sense of and better themselves, those of us in the past, and those that will come after. The intentionality of viewing cultural texts as chronopolitical acts of inheritance is central to Afrofuturism and Black radical love.

Janelle Monáe and Erykah Badu are two prime examples of the value and strength of Afrofuturism and Black radical love in Black popular culture. Their reconceptualization of Blackness as the 'Other' (Aghoro 338) is an act of Black radical love, as it rehumanizes dehumanized subjects. Yet, interestingly, it is often through categorizing their characters or themselves as non-human and android-esque subjects that they do so. By placing Blackness outside of the category of human, they reject and thus reshape the dominant classifications of human (Aghoro 335), which are predicated on hierarchization and the inferiority of Blackness. They exemplify the importance of Black popular culture in Afrofuturism and Black radical love

– the creativity that it allows for is the necessary ingredient for breaking the barriers of systems of domination.

Furthermore, Badu and Monáe "deliver pluralistic, open-source blueprints with their cultural production that their audiences can adopt as well as adapt to question their own boundaries playfully and to explore new possibilities for action and subject formation" (Aghoro 339). Their engagement with large audiences is only possible through the space of Black popular culture. The value of this engagement with masses of Black peoples through popular culture is that it allows those who consume this culture to participate in the processes of Afrofuturism and Black radical love that these creators manifest in their works. It allows, for example, those who would not have access to education that would impart them with the tools to resist systems of domination or to view themselves outside of the confines of racism, to do so through their engagement with these Black popular cultural texts. Thus, Afrofuturism in Black popular culture is a vessel for the transformation of audience members through the engagement with and practice of Black radical love and Afrofuturistic counterhegemonic themes.

The Marvel movie *Black Panther* (Coogler) is another seminal cultural text that exemplifies the intersection of Afrofuturism and Black radical love. *Black Panther* (Coogler) embodies the creativity and hope that are central to these two concepts. The movie demonstrates an interesting approach to chronopolitics – that of the 'fictive kinship'. Strong and Chaplin describe this 'fictive kinship' as a bond "formed not by DNA but by shared experience" (Strong and Chaplin 58). The movie's capability of portraying experiences that resonate with the African diaspora, and thus foster these 'fictive kinships,' speaks to the power of Black popular culture in

cultivating Black radical love. Even though the characters in this movie are not real, we are able to form bonds with them and, through these bonds, understand and radically love our ancestors.

Yet it is not solely our ancestors that we are able to radically love. It is also our fellow Black people. The power of *Black Panther* (Coogler) not only resides in the content of the movie itself but also in its engagement of Black audiences. Upon its theatrical release, the response to the movie by Black people was overwhelming: "When it opened on February 16, 2018, Black people all around the country embraced it fully—perhaps most visibly and pointedly as, on red carpets and in long lines at theaters, they donned fur coats, dashikis, crowns, lion sashes, and outfits inspired by precolonial African kingdoms" (Strong and Chaplin 58). Through its creative reconceptualization of Blackness, this movie allows Black people to celebrate and love themselves and their fellow Black peoples outside of the confines of stereotypes and racism. Thus, *Black Panther* (Coogler) speaks to the power of Black popular culture in fostering Black radical love in real life through its exploration of Blackness through Afrofuturism.

Despite the evidence of the positive role Black popular culture plays in countering systems of domination through the promotion of Black radical love and Afrofuturism, it remains embedded in these very systems. Black popular culture is the most sought-after form of capital in the entertainment industry. Much of the Black popular culture produced is created with the understanding that it will be consumed by white people. It is not always intentionally produced for Black audiences, or with a love of Black people, in mind. Furthermore, the entertainment industry is couched in capitalism. Many of the Black artists who produce Afrofuturistic media simultaneously benefit from capitalism, as they are part of the rich elite. Finally, not all Black culturally produced texts have counterhegemonic political agendas. Many, in fact, replicate many

of the very ideologies of domination which oppress Black peoples. Even those that do have counterhegemonic agendas, as is the case with most Afrofuturistic cultural texts, can, at least partially, fall into ideologies of oppression. *Black Panther* (Coogler), for example, remains embedded in certain notions of patriarchy and hierarchical royalty.

How do we address the positioning of these Black popular cultural texts within the systems of domination which they attempt to contest? Perhaps, it is about coming to terms with the fact that it is not necessarily an either/or situation (David 701). Perhaps it is about acknowledging the simultaneity of oppression and liberation. Earlier I mentioned that Afrofuturism is not about rejecting legacies of oppression but rather acknowledging them and their importance in shaping us. Perhaps Black popular culture is a site where this can go a step further, where we can also acknowledge the ways in which certain cultural texts negotiate both Afrofuturism and Black radical love while working to decolonize themselves. Perhaps it is about acknowledging that Afrofuturism and Black radical love are not static acts. They are projects that we embark on. They are not linear, they are messy, they are entrenched in the past, present and future, they have one foot in the systems of domination while having heart and mind outside of them.

Furthermore, it is about recognizing that the production of Black popular culture is not limited solely to Hollywood productions. Black popular culture encompasses movements such as the #MeToo movement and #BlackLivesMatter. The #BlackLivesMatter movement in particular is an important site of Afrofuturism and Black radical love (Moore 326). Its agenda is explicitly motivated by love and towards liberation. The movement upholds Black life outside of the confines of systems of domination, enacting the Black radical tradition. It also enacts

chronopolitical acts of inheritance by honouring those who were killed as a result of the violence of these systems, and by ensuring that their legacy lives on through hashtags like #SayTheirNames. It has been ground-breaking in its capacity to impart the underlying theoretical implications of Black radical love and liberation to Black peoples around North America and the world. It has allowed for the creation of grassroots movements around the globe that center Blackness. The #BlackLivesMatter movement is the embodiment of Afrofuturism and Black radical love as tools for change.

hooks argues that Black liberation is not simply about resisting the current systems of domination – radical liberation is about transformation (250). Afrofuturism and Black radical love are both a commitment to that transformation, to reshaping both Blackness and the world outside of the confines of the current systems of domination. They serve as counterhegemonic tools of resistance and freedom. An integral part of this is their capability of offering agency. Black popular culture is an important site for that agency. To be able to reclaim narratives and to build new ones we must have an imagination capable of theorizing and of loving ourselves outside of the confines of dominant systems of oppression. The works of Janelle Monáe (Aghoro 338) and Erykah Badu, the television series *When They See Us* (DuVernay) and the movie *Black Panther* (Coogler) all play a part in recovering and discovering our sense of agency: "if we can dream it, we can change it" (Strong and Chaplin 59). The #BlackLivesMatter movement offers us a space within which to enact that agency. Whether it be through the creation or the consumption of Black popular culture, or perhaps a coexistence of the two, practicing Black radical love through Afrofuturism is in and of itself a counterhegemonic act. In a system

predicated on violence, choosing radical love is an act of resistance (hooks 246). In a world predicated on Black death, choosing to build futures is an act of liberation.

I believe that it is imperative that we examine ways in which we can build different futures. Black people continue to be dehumanized and Blackness continues to be synonymous with death in our society and media. We must act radically to change this, and at the basis of this must be radical love. I strongly identify with the power of narratives in changing our worldview and thus our actions and the world around us. I believe that Black popular culture can be a space for empowering narratives and for inspiring their audiences to act towards liberatory futures. Most importantly, I believe that Afrofuturistic Black radical love is imperative in fighting for liberation and in building our futures. “What is at stake is the way we collectively engage with struggles for social justice in the near future and beyond” (David 697).

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