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Queering The Future: Examining Queer Identity In Afrofuturism

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This thesis examines the art aesthetic known as Afrofuturism. The research provided examines Afrofuturism in music, art, and literature. This thesis provides an example of applying Afrofuturism to performance studies within Communication Studies. This thesis contains the script to a solo performance art piece which attempts to build a bridge between performance studies and Afrofuturism, while also examining Black, Queer identity.

DEDICATION

This document is dedicated to my family. For my husband and best friend, James McKinley-Portee (the most patient man in the world). And to the memory of my grandmother, Rosa Scott.

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I would like to thank Dr. Craig Gingrich-Philbrook, Dr. Sandy Pensoneau-Conway, and Dr. Rebecca Walker. You have all been so very kind, and patient. This process has been a meaningful one thanks to your guidance.

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CHAPTER 1

WHAT IS AFROFUTURISM? A LITERATURE REVIEW

I became a fan of science fiction, fantasy, and comic books as a child, and I remain so to this day. Upon my discovery of the X-Men and subsequently the character "Storm," I became what is more commonly referred to as a nerd. A great many of the other children at my school who identified as nerds were baffled by two things: the fact I liked comic books, and the fact I was Black and liked comic books. Another aspect of me they couldn't grasp was the fact that a Black woman was the focus of my fandom. Even at such a young age (prior to the age of ten), I still wondered why "Storm," a Black woman, was the first Black superhero I had ever seen. "Storm" was the first superhero I had seen who looked like me, and I found myself enamored. I found myself seeking other stories and characters within this vein that allowed me to see a body remotely similar to mine in comic books, science fiction, and fantasy.

The purpose of this thesis is to discuss the history behind an art movement that is literary, artistic, and musical. This movement has made its way through music, art, and literature in the last four decades, and it shows no signs of slowing down. This aesthetic movement is known as Afrofuturism, and it is making its way to various forms of media and performance as we speak. I make this aesthetic the subject of my work because I feel that, in many respects, it applies to my everyday life and illuminates why Storm became so important to me as a child. That is to say that I am trying to see myself in places and things where individuals like me are rarely seen or given the opportunity to be seen. I am not alone in that effort, as the rise of Afrofuturism attests. In order to give a full description of what Afrofuturism truly is, and the role it will play in my

thesis, I will provide a brief history of definitions of this aesthetic, why it should be explored by Performance Studies, and a preview of how I will arrange the chapters.

History of Definitions of Afrofuturism

The term "Afrofuturism" was coined by cultural critic Mark Dery (180). Dery writes, "Speculative fiction that treats African-American themes and address African-American concerns in the context of twentieth-century techno- culture, and, more generally, African-American signification that appropriates images of technology and a prosthetically enhanced future might, for the want of a better term, be called 'Afrofuturism'" (180). Dery's assessment came from interviews he conducted with Black authors while asking the central question "Why are there so few Black authors in Science fiction?" Dery interviewed authors Greg Tate, Tricia Rose, and Samuel R. Delaney. Delaney stated that (at the time of the interview) there were only four Black, English-language science fiction novelists: "Octavia Butler, Steve Barnes, Charles Saunders, and me – the same number there was ten years ago" (Dery 188). So, Delaney has made it clear there was an absence in science fiction writing due to the low number of African-American authors in the genre. That absence persists. Where there is an absence, I find there is space for more people in the genre. Dery also goes on to make the case for music (as I will do later) and film as the forms of media in which Afrofuturism had a presence before the term was coined.

Dery makes the case that Afrofuturism can be seen in the film *Brother from Another Planet*, by John Sayles, and in music such as Jimi Hendrix's *Electric Ladyland*, George Clinton's *Computer Games*, and the music of Sun Ra (182). This is, of course, before the work of Janelle Monae and the likes of her comrades, the hip-hop duo known as OutKast. During his interview

with Tate, Rose, and Delany, Dery makes it clear how far back Afrofuturism reached, as does Delany explaining that his first work was published when he was only twenty years old, in 1962 (189-90). This predates the works of George Clinton, Sun Ra, and Octavia Butler (the biggest names in the aesthetic). However, this thesis requires that we also skip ahead a few decades to what some of the more recent authors are calling Afrofuturism.

Anderson posits that Afrofuturism sets itself apart from Eurocentric forms of futurism, because those where born out of fascism, but can function as a means of navigating other forms of futurism ("Critical" 179). Anderson also notes Dery's definition of Afrofuturism: "What is presently called Afrofuturism was originally a philosophical Techno-Cultural vernacular perspective that was engaged in a heterodox form of cultural production originating in socio-spatial temporal practices of black urban dwellers in North America after World War II" (Anderson, "Fabulous").

Ytasha Womack describes Afrofuturism as "An intersection of imagination, technology, the future and liberation" (Lafleur n.p., Womack 2). Womack further describes Afrofuturism as a means of mixing science fiction and fantasy culture that can create a revisionist history (n.p.). Womack has said during an interview: "Afrofuturism bridges so many aspects of our culture, from African mythology, art and hip-hop to politics, comic books and science" (Gonzalez n.p.).

Afrofuturism has also been placed into other concepts or sub-genres of aesthetics of expressing the Black experience through technology. Astro-Blackness is a concept which is of such sub-genre. Astro-Blackness is categorized as a means by which one's mind is aware of the universe (Anderson and Jones xii). Astro-Blackness is shaping the phenomenon that is Afrofuturism, and comes out of Africana Studies (xii). Considering this, it is easy to see that multiple people have varied ideas of what Afrofuturism truly is or can be. We can easily look to

how Afrofuturism could relate to the actual use of technology in the real world, not just fiction. Nettrice Gaskins cites Amiri Baraka in saying that Black individuals must consider their relationship to technology to make technology representative of Black culture (Gaskins 31; Baraka 157). In addition, she describes Afrofuturism as working with the past, present, and future at the same time (30). Meaning "Afrofuturism advocates for the revision of accepted, long-standing views, theories, historical events, and movements" (30). It is here we see the notion of revising history in order the speculate the future, thus giving Afrofuturism its essence. Though these are helpful definitions, there are still other definitions of Afrofuturism that could potentially conflict or work in tandem with them.

Emily Cluett's definition of Afrofuturism holds that "Afrofuturism is an aesthetic movement with an Afrocentric, science fiction inspired vision of the future" (n.p.). Furthermore, it is idealized as being a critique of the present while simultaneously predicting the future of Black people. To paraphrase, Cluett views Afrofuturism as a means to leave issues of oppression behind us as we move into the futures (n.p). This definition would appear to highlight the hopeful view of Afrofuturism as medium to revise history and to speculate the future.

The word "liberation" is mentioned a great deal in talking about Afrofuturism and the aesthetic it necessitates. One such definition states, "Afrofuturism is a liberating hermeneutic in the sense that its discourse reveals possibilities for envisioning a world untethered from the transcendental norm of whiteness, in which a contemporary Euro-American cannot write a person's future without mentioning Africa" (DeIuliss and Lohr 180).

Tobias c. van Veen cites Dery while crafting his definition of Afrofuturism:

> Afrofuturism is as much a recovery project of a revisionist past as it is an imagery of a future otherwise. Afrofuturism seeks to displace temporality from its

> whitewashed visions, the latter of which Mark Dery calls "the unreal estate of the Future already owned by the technocrats, futurologist, stream liners, and Set-Designers- white to a man-who have engineered our collective fantasies." (van Veen 83, Dery 180)

Some writers suggest Afrofuturism "has nothing to do with Africa and everything to do with cyber culture in the West" (Bristow 25). Afrofuturism is further described as working in conjunction with cyber feminism, as a way of redefining what is means to be Black, as Bristow puts it "(or exotically African) in Western culture" (27). Some authors argue that Afrofuturism is subject to the same critiques as cyber feminism "but extends it in a twofold manner by proposing Decentralization in its aesthetic" (28).

Kelly Baker Josephs notes the application of Afrofuturism to Caribbean Studies and retelling of a history of that region;

> The concept of Afrofuturism is perhaps more descriptive than prescriptive. It does not denote a movement that has clearly defined dates of cultural production or one that requires a minimum level of engagement with particular elements. Rather, it is most often classified as an aesthetic that one can find in art of various forms, elucidating the concerns that trouble works in various periods, concerns that may change or remain the same over time and across what may be called Black spaces. (125)

Afrofuturism is also described as looking at sci-fi, fantasy culture, and horror (Mbewe n.p). In her TED Talk in Namibia, Masi Mbewe cites Mark Dery's article *Black to the Future* as where the term was coined, and she cites jazz musician Sun Ra and science fiction writer Octavia E. Butler as examples. Mbewe asks, "What do Africans look like in the future?" and then takes

the audience to task by saying, "Now write about that." In addition to this, Mbewe even takes on this aesthetic in her own writing by asking, "Why couldn't I write a story about someone like Bella Swan and she look like me?" She made it clear she was frustrated with the lack of visibility of Black characters in a science fiction context. There, Mbewe refers to Octavia E. Butler's vampire novel *Fledgling*, a story of a 53-year old vampire in a ten-year old child's body who could walk in the sunlight because of the melanin in her skin, the same melanin in mine. Mbewe relates that Afrofuturism can link directly to stories of African mythology, citing folklore of African traditions of animals that can talk. She argues that these stories are indeed Afrofuturist stories. Mbewe cites these stories as source material, arguing that science fiction should not just be from a Eurocentric mindset. It should also have room in the mainstream for work that places Afrofuturist texts at the center. Mbewe goes on to say, "If I had come across and Afrofuturist novel when I was younger; when I decided to write my story, maybe I would have taken an Afrofuturist approach to it" (n.p.). With these ideas, it is clear that Mbewe makes the argument that Africa's mythology and the need for visibility in the mainstream science fiction genre (music, film, etc.) could work together to rail against the focus on European lived experience in science fiction.

Afrofuturism exists not only well within the world of literature and African folklore, it is also beginning to take shape in the context of music. As previously mentioned, Mbewe notes Sun Ra as a driving force behind Afrofuturism before the termed was coined, citing that Sun Ra claimed he was from another planet and came to Earth to promote peace and love. This assessment of the Black man as alien is not exclusive to Sun Ra; it was also used by the R&B collective Parliament Funkadelic (also known as P-Funk). From the 1970's to the present, P-

Funk has portrayed the Black man in space, making their group a prominent feature or establishment of Afrofuturism for that time (Bristow 27-28).

In today's age, we have other artists adhering to the Afrofuturist perspective, most notably singer and actress Janelle Monáe. Monáe's flagship single "Many Moons" from her album *Metropolis: The Chase Suite*, which offers a dystopian view of the future.

Monáe's music and Afrofuturist aesthetic hasn't ended with *Metropolis: The Chase Suite* (2008). She has continued the narrative of Cindi Mayweather with two additional albums that highlight Mayweather's narrative and growth in the future, beginning with the immediate follow up *The ArchAndroid* (2010) and *The Electric Lady* (2013). Gipson highlights the major Afrofuturist influence of Monáe:

> Through each album, song, lyric, and musical note, Monáe gives freedom to that "other" (marginalized victims within the world) or segregated minority that is often discussed in Afrofuturism. Instead of them being minimized, she maximizes their existence and breathes this sort of life. It is as though she elevates this state of consciousness that surpasses the misfortunes that one may visually perceive in today's society. (93)

Additionally, Monáe is following the footsteps of other artists who have been categorized in the genre of Afrofuturism, such as "Afrikaa Bambataa, Soul II Soul, George Clinton, Sun Ra and Grace Jones" (Gipson 93). Monáe's appearance in her work is described as a homage to her parents and the "Gatsby-era" aesthetic, which Gipson refers to as the "post-human androgynous symbol of class and mobility" (93).

Artists like Monáe and Parliament Funkadelic are not alone in this aesthetic choice. Hip-hop artist and producer Missy Elliot also contributes to the movement of Afrofuturism. In Elliot's

first video, *The Rain (Supa Dupa Fly)*, we see her in a large black body suit that almost appears as though it is an inflated trash bag. Elliott wears it in a variety of settings, such as a corridor that appears to have two large pendulums swinging on either side of the room. Elliot's tradition of this aesthetic made a resurgence with her video and stand-alone single *WTF (Where They From)*. In this video, Elliot dons a silver jogging suit which has pieces of broken mirror placed upon it as she begins the song. Throughout the video, Elliott wears clothing and make up which appears to highlight this aesthetic of the future, such as blue lipstick, silver sun glasses, and see-through plastic jump suits. Her back up dancers move and flex as though they are contortionists, almost appearing alien like. With the lighting, tone, sound, and over all appearance, it is easy to view Missy Elliott's work through the aesthetic choices of Afrofuturism.

As for the aspect of queer identity, Anderson makes his case for another queen in music from the last century. Anderson offers an examination of disco singer Sylvester James, and his work in the disco music genre of the 70's and 80's (Anderson, "Fabulous"). Notably, Afrofuturism is typically an aesthetic choice in expression of technology and African cultural artifacts. Along with this notion of expression, Anderson suggests Afrofuturism "lacks analyses on Black queer performance" (n.p.). Anderson clarifies: "By 'black queer' performance I am suggesting an identity, understood as a sexuality that does not conform to Western notions of heterosexual expression" (Anderson n.p.).

Anderson claims Sylvester utilized music technology and various theatre techniques as well as doing persona work as "Ruby Blue" with the Cockettes. He also began to perform as famous figures like Coretta Scott King. Though he found success in this format, Sylvester began to change his appearance, making it more marketable for the purposes of commercial success.

Though Sylvester changed his sound and his androgyny, he made an impact on disco music by using technology for the purposes of dance music (n.p.).

In another art form, Afrofuturism is described as having a fusion of Afrocentric concepts with the concepts of futurism (Fielder, "Afrofuturism"). It is also noted that these images can be translated into images in comics, video games, speculative fiction, etc. Tim Fielder began working in illustration as a means not only to make a living but also to see people who look like him in science fiction and speculative fiction, citing his love of the few Black Star Trek and Star Wars characters. Fielder wanted to remain an artist as a means to make a living, though there was not much work in creating Black characters in these images.

Fielder posits that, to move forward with Afrofuturism, he created the concept of *manifesting* those ideas of speculative fiction and then executing them ("Afrofuturism"). When Fielder discusses the idea of manifesting, he means that one has to "change the way" they do work. With this idea in mind, Fielder created another concept coming from Afrofuturism: "Dieselfunk." Fiedler calls the "Dieselfunk way" a means of "willing what you want." Creating a studio of comic illustration with the same name, Fielder began producing a comic known as *Matty's Rocket*, which is loosely based on the life of the first Black woman pilot to receive an international pilot's license, Bessie Coleman. Drawing from the narrative of Bessie Coleman and Harriet Tubman, Fielder claims he fused these historical figures, naming the title character after his great-great-grandmother. During this project, he found that he was working more than ever. He decided to create the design studio and change the graphic images into a comic book. Fielder states that during his work, he drew on additional influences from the likes of Buck Rogers and these historical figures to create another concept he refers to as *Retro-futurism*.

During this time, Fielder began to teach kids how to draw animation for comic books, taught Afrofuturism, and adapted a Samuel R. Delany work into a graphic novel (sadly, Fielder didn't say which novel he adapted). After the interview and adaptation of Delany's work, he created an event he calls *Afrofuturfest* as a safe space for Black artists to share and display their work. Fielder posits the most important part of the Afrofuturist creation process is to visualize, manifest and do the work.

Recently, an exhibition took place in Harlem, New York, at the Studio Museum, displaying the work known as *Shadows Took Shape* (Carrington 24: Keith and Whitley 23). Within the anthology of work documenting this art exhibit, there are various contributions by those who participate in the movement, most notably Samuel R. Delany. Delany recounts his lived experience during the 1950s and asks, "Did the science fiction I read at the time talk about the Black situation in America, about the progress for racial change?" (Delany 109). He recounts his experience with the reading of *I, Robot* and how "the tenets of the story note the ideal Black person" (109). Delany goes on to discuss the need for more visibility and inclusion, stating how few science fiction writers there are, at least beyond Octavia E. Butler (who was a former writing student of his). He calls for more Black people in Science Fiction, and he says, "We need images of tomorrow, and our people need them more than most" (115).

In recent years, more and more information and art has surfaced exploring the movement of Afrofuturism. In 2014, house music producer King Britt created an event as part of the MoMA PS1 festival, an evening simply known as "Moondance: A Night in the Afro Future" (Bakare n.p.). This was to showcase Afrofuturism lectures and discussions along with live performances (Bakare). Here, Afrofuturism crosses musical boundaries from jazz to hip-hop and reaches into the world of philosophy and visions of the future.

One name that has remained present throughout the various texts I have found covering Afrofuturism is that of jazz musician and godfather of Afrofuturism, Sun Ra. Sun Ra believed that the fusion of music and technology had the power to fundamentally "heal the world" (Womack 3). Claiming that he was from Saturn, Sun Ra began to experiment with jazz music and technology. Sun Ra claimed to be an alien on a mission to promote world peace (Womack 6). Sun Ra performed in costumes and was "rife with Egyptian images and spirituality" (DeIuliis and Lohr 181). He was the catalyst for the aesthetic which was later adopted by other artists like George Clinton, who also utilized African symbols (181). Sun Ra later created a fictional film *Space Is the Place*, where we see him find another planet to colonize, saying he will use music to teleport Earth's population there as a means to create peace (Womack 6). It is important to note Sun Ra died in 1993, a year before the first major publication using the term Afrofuturism (Womack 6).

In December, *The New York Times* published an article called *Afrofuturism: The Next Generation* (La Ferla n.p.). Yet again, we read that Afrofuturism uses science fiction, but also Egyptian mythology or appearance. La Ferla recounts the appearance of singer Solange Knowles and declares it as part of the aesthetic that is Afrofuturism: "In November, on "Saturday Night Live", her [Beyoncé's] sister, Solange, flaunted a sundial-size headdress of crystals and tight woven braids, looking every inch a regal visitor from distant planet" (La Ferla n.p.).

Afrofuturism is also becoming more and more prominent in the world of fashion, yet another art form outside of literature and music. According to La Ferla, Riccardo Tisci of Givenchy began to use Afrofuturist imagery in their clothing line, signed Erykah Badu as their spokesmodel, and incorporated an Egyptian symbol; the Eye of Horus. However, Michelle Busayo Olupona is quoted in saying "Afrofuturism has to become something more than just an

idea of Black people in shiny metallic clothing." Olupona says of her clothing line "What they say about the future … is that we're always going to be here" (La Ferla n.p.).

This aesthetic has also taken shape in the form of a boutique in Brooklyn called 9J (La Ferla n.p.). Some of the pieces from 9J involve fusion of technology and Afrocentric themes with a "streamlined progressive-looking opulence"(La Ferla n.p.). La Ferla quotes the shop owner, Jerome LaMaar, as saying, "'We want to play with the idea of what is tribe, what is Africa, what is the future, and mix it all up without being predictable. Mr. LaMaar insisted. Who wants to see what's already been done?'" (La Ferla n.p.)

LaMaar's last question hits a chord with me as an aspiring artist and scholar. As a self-proclaimed nerd and lover of science fiction, I want to see something different, and I want to experience it in a way I haven't before. I came to Afrofuturism because I have always wanted to see more images of people who look like me in a science fiction context. I have wanted to see more Black super heroes and learn their stories while watching them fight oppression in a variety of formats. I wanted to be a part of Afrofuturism before I ever knew there was a term for such an aesthetic. I craved seeing Black people in space, just like Mr. Fielder stated in his TED Talk (Fielder, "Afrofuturism").

To take this conversation a little further, I would like to offer a few themes to bring in my own sense making of Afrofuturism. The varying definitions of Afrofuturism have identified several of its qualities, linking the term to aesthetics, literature, and music. As we have see, definitions range from Cluett's perspective of Afrofuturism abandoning the oppression of today in order to speculate the future (n.p.) to Joseph's assertion of the claiming of Black spaces over time (125). For my purposes, Afrofuturism is productively manifold, but it usually has one or more of the following qualities:

- It takes place within an artistic medium, including, but not limited to, visual art, music and literature (Womack, Anderson, Gaskins).
- It revises history to speculate about the future of the Black community (Gaskins).
- It imagines that future particularly in terms of African-American involvement in various forms of social justice (Cluett).
- It provides a means for individuals to seek liberation from oppressive conditions and ideologies through imagination, African mythology, and visualizing new possibilities for self-determination (Mbewe, Womack, Cluett).

These are the recurring themes I see when reading the host of definitions of Afrofuturism, and it seems there are even more perspectives as to what Afrofuturism is at its core. This aesthetic incites inquiry into every major field of study, including but not limited to Africana Studies. With Afrofuturism sub-genres such as Asro-Blackness and Dieselfunk, the definitions are bound to become more complex and nuanced over time. These ideas are what Afrofuturism means to me today, and allow me to make sense of it: and help use it to have conversations about liberation, equality, and social justice. The primary area in which I have these conversations is Performance Studies. Although, these conversations are productive, I believe Performance Studies has stake in Afrofuturism that we can expand, as I explain in the next section.

Why Afrofuturism Warrants Exploration by Performance Studies

From my perspective, performance studies is capable of exploring the future(s) of Black identity and social justice, just like Afrofuturism. However, I feel it is necessary to go back to the

origins of performance studies and understand how the term performance studies was coined and ultimately how definitions of performance studies have shifted over time.

Performance Studies in the National Communication Association came from oral interpretation, though the two terms exist simultaneously (Pelias and VanOosting 219). Oral tradition or interpretation means the interpretation of literature and the nature of human discourse (219). Furthermore, there is the argument in performance studies that says scholars of oral interpretation should move beyond traditional or canonical texts to a broader range, a move which is overdue for critical inquiry (222). This said, the genre of Afrofuturism offers a rich and expansive selection of texts which can be explored by performance studies scholars. Ranging from Octavia E. Butler to Samuel R. Delaney, texts within the context of science fiction from a Black perspective offer a new interpretation or understanding of social justice and the Black experience. Pelias and VanOosting make the case for more literature to be explored in order to discuss the breath human experience, and Afrofuturism can do precisely that. This is of particular importance since performance studies scholars look to cultural text as a "rich and appealing body of material for scholarly attention and artistic production" (Pelias and VanOosting 223).

Performance studies is said to incorporate other fields of study within its research, including anthropology as performance or performative anthropology (Pelias and VanOosting 225). Considering this is indicative of cultural exploration, Afrofuturism is defined as not solely engaging with the future but working with the past and present as well (Gaskins 30). Performance Studies engages with anthropology as a study of people and their societies; Afrofuturism aids in this study because Afrofuturism looks at the past and present to speculate the future. If performance studies utilizes anthropology for the purposes of analyzing human discourse, then Afrofuturism can expand that discourse and research by speculating and envisioning a unique

future of African-American experience by looking to the past and engaging with the present. A site and source for social justice and activism, Afrofuturism walks side by side with performance studies with the notion of the actor also being an activist (Pelias and VanOosting 226).

With my examination in performance studies, I shift to a more specific category of performance: Black performance theory. "Black performance theory [BPT] helps us realize performance. In this performance/theory coupling what is revealed to us is how performance performs and how theory performs us through its realizations, claims, and possibilities" (Madison viii). Furthermore, "The performative is the culmination of both in that it does something to make a material, physical, and situational difference – then BPT speaks to why all this matters to blackness and to contested identities" (viii). The call of Black performance theory stands with Afrofuturism in that both fields are expressions of the Black experience through distinctive perspectives. Afrofuturism can be used as a source for the very same resistance Madison is defining as a key element of Black performance theory, speaking back to power structures which keep people of color, specifically Black individuals, marginalized.

Within Black performance theory, theorists have begun to embrace and examine the ideas and aesthetics behind Afrofuturism. In doing so, one theorist turns their attention to the notion of the flying Africans in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*, Soyica Diggs Colbert equates this literary text's description of flying Africans to performance (Colbert 130). When thinking of the call to explore non-canonical literary work, one can easily see how Morrison's writings, though critically acclaimed, could easily qualify as one of the values or demands made of oral interpretation, later coined performance studies, answering the call of Pelias and VanOosting. Afrofuturism can answer the call for expanded recognition of diverse literary works, but it can examine the use of movement onstage through dance. In the interview Mark Dery facilitated with

Tricia Rose, Rose states that one dance performed in Black communities, the robot, demonstrates Afrofuturism because Black people have already been treated like robots working within a capitalist system in which they had very little value as human beings (143). Performance and Afrofuturism are again walking side by side in the discussion of expression of human experience through performance. More specifically, the human experience being expressed through a series of movement can act as a form of resistance or cultural expression, giving the performer the mantle of activist.

Performance studies scholar Marvin Carlson has also stated that, at the end of the century, there was a call or demand for more multicultural performance artists ranging from women, gay men, African Americans, Hispanics, to young Asian-Americans, to provide more diversity to the performances of identity (177). If such a value or call remains, then Afrofuturism can answer such a call via stage performance, music, or illustration/installation artwork. I make an attempt to do so with my own solo performance, *Ibis and Olu: An Afrofuturist Comic Book*. In it, I tell my own narrative of growing up in the projects and clinging to comic books. In addition, I also created two comic book superheroes, which I performed as part of the show, in an attempt to call attention to issues of the prison industrial complex, police brutality, Black Queer identity, and experimentation on African Americans. It was my wish to fuse Afrofuturism and solo performance together, creating my narrative as a means to embody both performer and activist.

I propose bringing the concepts and application of Afrofuturism directly to performance studies, specifically, to the genres of Black queer performance, persona work, and personal narrative. I want to utilize Afrofuturism as a means of both looking at the past, and understanding the present state of Black identity in America. Using these experiences and the ideas of Black images in comics, I want to speculate a future of evolved beings. Using the ideas of the artists

who came before, I will create my own version of Black and queer identity in the future. Using Afrofuturism as a platform, it is my goal to discuss issues of gentrification, police brutality, diversity in higher education, and the prison industrial complex, using performance as an act of protest.

Chapter Previews

Chapter Two I make the case for Afrofuturism in music as being a critical and important phenomenon for examination by performance studies. To discuss the implications in music I will look more deeply at the work of Janelle Monáe and Missy Elliott. Attending not only to the sound and lyrics of the music, I will also look at the images of these artists on stage, their costumes, make up, and aesthetics.

Chapter Three offers a critical look at *Parable of the Sower*, by Octavia E. Butler. Positioning Butler's novel as an Afrofuturist piece, and also as a perfect example of Black Feminist Thought coming from the work of Patricia Hill Collins, I will make the case for *Parable of the Sower* as combining the aesthetics and philosophy of Afrofuturism and the tenets of Black Feminist Thought.

In Chapter Four, I will make the case for my own creative work *Ibis and Olu: An Afrofuturism Comic Book* as an Afrofuturist performance art piece/ personal narrative. The chapter is primarily my scrip for the show, but includes an introduction that reflect on how it embodied the qualities of Afrofuturism as I understood them at the time. In the show, I discuss my need for Black comic book characters as a child, which resulted in my childhood hobby of comic books and my obsession with Storm of the *X-Men* comic series. I also use this opportunity onstage to discuss matters such as gentrification, police brutality, profiling, and government experimentation on Black individuals. In the show, I also perform the title characters "Ibis and

Olu" twin brothers with super human powers set more than thirty years in the future. Their stories hint toward Afro pessimism: the argument that things may not get better.

For Chapter Five, the conclusion, I restate why performance studies needs Afrofuturism and what I would change in my solo performance, *Ibis and Olu: An Afrofuturist Comic Book*, should I perform it again. I will also discuss how Afrofuturism suffers from and must address the limiting perspective created by a lack of recognition of queer identity when it comes to author Samuel R. Delany and show how performance studies can be a part of this trajectory.

CHAPTER 2

JANELLE MONÁE AND MISSY ELLIOT: BLACK ARTISTS OF THE FUTURE

The world of music has been near and dear to my heart, especially as an aspiring singer and drummer. Upon my discovery of Afrofuturism, I quickly learned this aesthetic quite easily translates to music; I have been listening to such music for years, unaware that there was a name for this aesthetic. If not through content, then perhaps through the visuals of music videos, Afrofuturism has made its mark in hip-hop and R&B music. The messages conveyed in this genre typically bring voice to social justice issues, embodying the tenets of Afrofuturism.

The purpose of this chapter is to discuss the implications of Afrofuturism in music. Ranging from topics of video and performance aesthetics, to the lyrics of the musical works, I consider the implications of Afrofuturism in reference to artists Janelle Monáe and Missy Elliott. I make the case for Missy Elliott, in particular, because there has been so little coverage of the work she has completed over the last two decades, and more. Though Afrofuturism and its speculative implications are not exclusive to these two artists, I find it is important that I focus on these two women specifically. This focus is important because both Monáe and Elliott are equally accessible in the world of Hip-Hop and R&B, as well as popular culture at large. Though Missy Elliott is generally associated with Hip-Hop of the 1990's, and Janelle Monáe with the later 2010's, I want to show the parallel of these two artists, a decade apart from their respective solo debuts, but still using the same aesthetic to talk about topics of which they are passionate.

So, let's begin with the Android herself, Janelle Monáe, and uncover who she is as an artist by looking at her lyrical and visual aesthetic. Coming from a lower working-class family, Monáe made her way to music from Kansas City, Kansas (Gipson 95). Monáe uses her music

and aesthetic to focus such topics as race class and gender (93). Individuals like myself have been requesting or rather demanding more positive images of African Americans in media, and Monáe utilizes Afrofuturism to create a conversation around Black experience to negate stereotypes (96). The breaking of stereotypes plays a key role in the music video for "Many Moons." The personification of her character, Cindi Mayweather is non-stereotypical. Gipson writes "Cindi Mayweather is the captain and the songs she sings are the ships that travel and carry freedom song messages in and out of space (95). Using mediated messages of what it means to fight for freedom, Cindi Mayweather is a full-on catalyst for change. Monáe uses this character as a set up to reevaluate the past, and speculate about the future (95). This engagement with the past and present, makes Cindi and Janelle the embodiment of Afrofuturism. Going back to the earlier mentioned definition of Afrofuturism, as engaging with the past, present and future (Gaskins 30) shows that Monáe is a true Afrofuturist artist. This isn't just by virtue of costume; it shows in her overall message and her lyrics. Because it includes more than her "shiny costume." Monáe's performance as a whole meets Busayo Olupona's concerns about reducing Afrofuturism to clothing. Of course, one observation could easily equate her to Afrofuturism on the strength of her music video "Many Moons," alone. In it, Monáe articulates her frustrations with society via an Afrofuturistic auction, and as Monáe sings as Mayweather, her copies model the runway as people bid on them. The irony of course is that Monáe is singing for freedom and calling for a revolution while the word "Sold" is appearing as a hologram over the bodies of her copies as they strut down the runway as property to be sold. Though Cindi Mayweather is the prototype from which the other copies are derived, it is her task to sing, to entertain, as her copies are reduced to commodities.

How does this utilize the tenets of Afrofuturism? Monáe's performance is calling back to the slave trade and how our Black and Brown bodies were meant to be used for labor, and entertainment. The slave trade goes back several centuries in American history. Michelle Alexander uncovers the birth of slavery in gripping detail:

> American Indians where considered unsuitable as slaves, largely because native tribes were in a position to fight back. The fear of raids by Indian tribes led plantation owners to grasp for an alternative source of free labor. European immigrants were also deemed poor candidates for slavery and not because of their race, but rather because they were in short supply and enslavement would, quite naturally, interfere with voluntary immigration to the new colonies. Plantation owners thus viewed Africans, who were relatively powerless, as the ideal slaves. The systematic enslavement of Africans, the rearing of their children under bondage, emerged with all deliberate speed…. (Alexander 23-24)

With this examination of the beginning of slavery, we see that Monáe is calling it in to a futurist context by trading traditional images of Black slaves with that of Black androids. Black people have a history of singing Negro Spirituals in the fields during the slave trade, and some of the songs were secret code for escaping bondage via the underground railroad (Guenther 74-75). Slaves were singing in the fields while literally making calls for freedom and telling other people how to achieve it. Though this is not unheard of in the era of the pre-Jim Crow South, what is unique is how Janelle Monáe utilizes this history for "Many Moons." Cindi Mayweather addresses the concerns of society while others like her, literally other androids exactly like her, are being sold off as she is being used for entertainment, for work, while secretly telling the others how to reach for freedom. "You're a free bird in your mind / Your freedom's in a bind"

she sings as other copies of her sing along with her, telling themselves how freedom is a struggle and therefore only an illusion in their current situation. She highlights that their freedom is a constant struggle and a constant task that requires working to reach the common goal.

In regard to Afrofuturism, Monáe may not have revised history, but she did indeed speculate about the future and how the issues of equality, exploitation, and justice should be addressed. Monáe doesn't end "Many Moons," however by highlighting this imagination of the future. Monáe's follow up album, *The ArchAndroid*, debuted with the leading single and subsequent video "Tightrope." In the video, we see Monáe's Cindi Mayweather in an asylum (called The Palace of the Dogs) with other individuals who appear to be other androids. At the beginning of the video, a preface states that dancing has been outlawed by the state because of its magical properties. Before the song begins, the viewer sees two individuals in tuxedos, sitting next to each other in the asylum. Both individuals are Black men. One of the individuals is simply tossing a blue ball into the air, and does so repeatedly until it doesn't come back down, but rather levitates, and catches the attention of the gentleman sitting next to him. After staring at the floating object for a few moments, the song "Tightrope" begins. We see Cindi Mayweather sing in her cell, slowly make her way out of it, and begin to dance. Her dancing summons others out of their cells and they begin to join in the dancing. The background dancers move like robots, recalling Tricia Rose's statement of how Black folks have been imitating exploited labor via dancing like a robot (Dery 213-14). With this assessment in mind, we see this robotic movement being put into the bodies of dancers, who are put on display for an audience. In "Tightrope," Monáe makes an analysis of society's demands on individuals, and how their achievements are perceived. Monáe does not specify what achievements she is referring to but makes a general statement in singing, "You can't get too high / I said you can't get too low / cause you get too

high / no, you'll surely be low" (Monáe). Monáe makes a critique of respectability politics, saying that once you have achieved a specific goal, or "get too high," there will be those who will attempt to bring you down as a means of continuing to hinder you. This is important. "Tightrope" continues Monáe's critique in her earlier work. In the video "Many Moons," we saw Mayweather/Monáe call for freedom; a few years later, in "Tightrope," we see her incarcerated while discussing what it means to achieve one's goal and essentially being held back. This is a brilliant strategy for the overall discussion of freedom and acceptance, because it could be said that Monáe's character, Cindi Mayweather, did indeed reach the height of popularity, but in "getting too high" she was brought back down by malfunctioning and being placed in and asylum where she isn't allowed to do the very thing that helped make her popular: dance.

What is truly interesting is what happens to Cindi Mayweather as the video runs its course. Monáe has five people dancing back up with her, and they are all dressed just like her. However, once the dancers and Monáe make their way through the asylum, we see more dancers and musicians in a large cafeteria like area. These individuals are playing instruments and dancing on the furniture. After the bridge to the song, Monáe slowly begins to make her way far from the crowd of dancing cyborgs and walks toward a blank wall. Once she reaches the wall, Monáe disappears in a puff of smoke, leaving only her clothing behind, attached to the wall she just walked through. While people are singing and dancing, we see a nurse in dismay as she watches the individuals dance. The nurse then runs to two large, dark, hooded figures with no faces. Both figures appear to be well over six feet tall. She shows them what she has seen by imitating dancing. She then points in the direction of the cafeteria area where everyone is dancing and performing. This is all happening while we wait to see where Monáe disappeared to. We quickly realize that Monáe has made her way outside, and though her clothing was still

attached to the wall she walked through, she remains fully clothed. Monáe walks around trees and dead leaves and looks at the sky for a brief moment before she turns back towards the wall she just walked through to see the same two large dark figures standing amongst the trees, waiting to retrieve her. The two figures walk her back to the asylum. She walks back through the wall, and the figures escort her to her cell, and the video ends.

This type of speculative future and analysis gives Monáe her power and agency. Monáe has taken conversations centering race, gender, and equality and essentially set them on their ear. Monáe is brilliant and purposeful in the execution of this analysis, because, once we dig a little deeper into the meaning of the songs, we can see that Monáe isn't just singing to other androids in the world of Metropolis; she is singing to marginalized individuals in our current reality. It is my firm belief that Monáe is singing to Black people in particular. Not only are all the androids' copies of her Black body in "Many Moons", but all of the dancing androids in "Tightrope" are Black as well. All of these figures strive for freedom in some regard, and all are trying to move to a common goal and existence in the future.

With a slightly less political statement, but with an equally visually striking aesthetic, is hip-hop maven, singer, songwriter, and producer, Missy Elliott. Elliott, despite having been in the music industry for decades, actually doesn't have a great deal of talk around the relationship between her work and the aesthetics of Afrofuturism, which is why I am attempting to make that case about her.

As stated in the previous chapter, in her video for "The Rain (Supa Dupa Fly)," Elliott utilizes the aesthetic of Afrofuturism with rather "out there" images and movements. Once again, in this video, Black dancers move like robots, isolating limbs and moving them to the beat of the music. Missy Elliott, herself, utilizes this type of movement. Though lyrically she doesn't set the

scene for political conversations, she does still utilize Afrofuturist aesthetic to highlight who she is as an artist. In the beginning of the song, she says repeatedly "Me I'm super fly / super-duper fly," meaning that she is the best at what she does, or that she is simply really "cool" (as what I believe "fly" to mean based on my own childhood). Elliott makes the case for herself as an artist with striking colors and visual spectacle.

This visual style doesn't end with "The Rain"; it continues in Elliott's videos for the following two decades. Her immediate follow up video, "Sock It 2 Me," uses Afrofuturism and the empowerment of Black female sexuality. She does this not only with the lyrics of the song, but also. To understand how we need to turn to video game history. There was a game called "Mega Man" on Nintendo game systems, released in 1987 (Nutt and Speer n.p.) Mega Man is a boy robot who was designed as antithesis to a plague of rebelling construction robots (n.p.). Mega Man also had the ability to steal the weapons of the "bosses" he defeated throughout the game, which some experts say contributed to the games longevity (n.p.). Mega Man may not be an Afrofuturist character, but it is very telling to see how this character can tie in with the aesthetic and the message of robot identity/cyborg identity and walk closely with the tenets of Afrofuturism. Given the history of this character, it is easy to see why someone in Hip-Hop would use Mega Man's appearance to convey a message of sexual liberation and affection.

Elliott is dressed like the lead character of this game for the music video. She dons a rounded-off robotic suit in the colors of red and white, with a large "M" on the chest plate of the outfit. In the game from which the video's aesthetic is derived, the "M" stands for Mega Man; in the video, it stands for Missy. In the video, she has an unnamed sidekick wearing a similar garment. As the song continues, we see Elliott and her side kick fight and destroy robots. There is a switch between scenes, and we see Elliott, in red camouflage, with background dancers

wearing similar garments. As the video progresses, Elliott and her side-kick are rescued by another artist who is featured on the track: Da Brat. As Da Brat rescues Elliott from the impending robots come to eliminate them, Da Brat delivers her rap verse. Da Brat, another woman-identified rapper, is also dressed like a character from Mega Man. Her suit is black and orange with a spiked helmet. Da Brat also makes her entrance on a flying device that resembles a jet ski, with a large "B"; indicative of her name, Da Brat, on the front of the machine. The featured appearances aren't limited to the Da Brat. Another guest appearance is made by Missy Elliott's friend, producer and long-time collaborator, Timbaland. Though Timbaland doesn't give any rhymes or verses like Elliott or Da Brat, he simply dances in the video. Although he is Elliott's friend, Timbaland is dressed Mega Man's main villain, Dr. Wily. Timbaland, in keeping with Dr. Wily in the Mega Man video game theme, is dressed in a lab coat with thick black rimmed glasses. He also wears a gray-haired wig in the video, giving him a mad scientist appearance, just like Mega Man's Dr. Wily. Within the aesthetic of R&B and Hip-Hop, Elliott and her dancers once again utilize robotic movements, even when she isn't dressed as the video game character, Mega Man. What is interesting about this video is what the video actually does for the message of the song, and how the Afrofuturist aesthetics allow the message to slip in almost unnoticed. This video, though humorous, is still one of the most visually striking videos I have ever seen. The importance of this video is not only the visuals, but also the significance of three Black women (Missy, her unrecognizable side kick, and Da Brat) having to face off against a Black man (Timbaland) to advocate for sexual empowerment and satisfaction, all while fighting robots on a fictional planet. Considering that, upon the music video's release, there were not that many women in hip hop, it was important to see women singing, dancing, and proclaiming their own sexuality.

In “Sock It 2 Me,” Elliott is making the case for a sexual encounter with another person. Though the gender identity is never revealed, Elliott’s call for affection and satisfaction are still of importance. Elliott says in the song, “Let’s take it to affection / Just you and me. Let’s see if you can bring, bring, bring / the nasty out of me.” In the chorus of the song, Elliot sings “Oh ah / sock it to me like I want you to / I can take it like a pro and you’ll know / do like bro with back stroke / my hormones are jumping like disco.” There may be no direct correlation to the aesthetic of the video and the lyrics of the song, but, it is significant to note the empowerment of the lyrics. Elliott is making the claims of desire; demands a sexual encounter; and reassures that she can handle whatever happens during this sexual encounter, by singing “I can take it like a pro.” Elliott is saying all of this while portraying a robot. This is a brilliant tactic, because Elliott uses a science fiction aesthetic that is typically marketed toward males to make the case for a Black woman to also make sexual demands from aplace of empowerment. Elliott uses the aesthetics of Afrofuturism as a remarkably feminist aesthetic. She takes two male-dominated fields (video games and hip hop) and reclaims them as her own.

When looking at my definitions of Afrofuturism, we can take the work of Monáe and Elliott a step further. Though Monáe doesn’t engage with the past in “Tightrope,” she certainly does with “Many Moons” placing herself on the auction block while singing and performing for those in power. To implicate Black bodies being sold is to make our personhood as Black individuals a commodity. Monáe also uses Afrofuturism speculate our future as a Black community as a whole. In the video, she essentially is having to sell herself, but is also making the argument to resist social norms. One could say that she is being critical of society while asking marginalized groups, in this case Black people, to fight back. Elliott uses Afrofuturism in a similar way, but for a different topic: Black female sexuality. Mind you, Elliott doesn’t show

any skin except her face. But, would it be perfectly fine if she did? Absolutely, and she would have full reason and agency if she so chose to do so. The task at hand for Elliott was seeking liberation, sexual liberation. Though it may not be as largely talked about as the work of Monáe, Elliott's video calls for satisfaction, and is doing so within an oppressive constext: hip hop. Hip hop can be very alienating toward women, but here you have Elliott making sexual demands within the genre, while also adapting a video game aesthetic to convey the message. This is not an easy task, but Elliott makes it look so effortless. The video, even for twenty years ago, was incredibly striking, proving the notion that Afrofuturism can translate into any art movement, regardless of the context.

The overwhelming messages from Monáe and Elliott are, indeed, political in their own respective arguments. Monáe calls for the freedom and recognition of the various modes of confinement of Black bodies: Elliott uses a video game aesthetic to make the case for Black female sexual empowerment. To demand people recognize their freedom is in a bind or to demand that they "sock it to you," reveal positionalities that deserve some form of inquiry from communication studies, specifically performance studies. Going back to the assessment of Pelias and VanOosting, we see two artists blazingly being activists by engaging with a particular performance or text (226). Elliott and Monáe are not simply singers and song-writers: they use Afrofuturism and its aesthetics to make their case as activist/performers.

As if to close the case on any doubt of their Afrofuturist commitments, Monáe even stated in an interview that she draws her aesthetics from another Afrofuturist artist from a completely different medium: Octavia E. Butler, primarily known as a novelist. Marking how Butler transcends race and gender in her book *Wildseed*, Monae stated the book was an

inspiration for her work as Cindi Mayweather (Gipson 96). This assessment or tribute to Butler, leads me directly to my argument in Chapter Three.

CHAPTER 3

OCTAVIA E. BUTLER AND *PARABLE OF THE SOWER*

For the purpose of this chapter, it is vital that I express Black Feminist thought as the theoretical framework prior to reaching my analysis. Using this framework, I intend to define terms, and ideas in order to make a sound case that Black Feminist Thought illuminates the Afrofuturist dimensions of Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower*.

Patricia Hill Collins poses the question "Why are African-American women and our ideas, not known or believed in?" (5). Collins goes on to state the nature of Black intellectual suppression. She writes:

> This dialectic of oppression and activism, the tension between the suppression of African-American women's ideas and our intellectual activism in the face of that suppression, constitutes the politics of U.S. Black feminist thought. More important, understanding this dialectical relationship is critical in assessing how U.S. Black feminist thought- it's core themes, epistemological significance, and connections to domestic and transnational Black feminist practice- is fundamentally embedded in a political context that has challenge its very right to exist. (6)

Understanding this suppression of African-American women's intellect is a crucial purpose of Black Feminist Thought. Recognizing the lack of proper recognition of Black women's ideas was also part of my introduction. When researching the work of Octavia E. Butler, I could only find a select number of titles by Butler, when looking in three bookstores, in two states, with only a hour's drive separating each location. This lack of visibility, or access to her work, is another form of suppression. Even one of the clerks at the bookstore in which I was

able to find her work said most of Butler's work has to be special ordered. Thus, I bought all the books they had by Butler: both of them.

In what follows I discuss a few distinguishing features of Black Feminist thought. The first is understanding its importance. Black women are still an oppressed group."U.S. Black women participate in a dialectical relationship linking African-American women's oppression and activism" (Collins 25). A second distinguishing feature is how Black feminist thought links experiences and ideas (Collins 28). This feature recognizes that though Black women may face the same challenges, it does not mean that they may face the same experience (Collins 29). Collins explains:

> Despite the fact that U.S. Black women face common challenges, this neither means that individual African-American women have all had the same experiences nor that we agree on the significance of our varying experiences. Thus, on the other hand, despite the common challenges confronting the U.S. Black women as a group, diverse responses to these core themes characterize U.S. Black women's group knowledge or standpoint. (29)

Hence, Black Feminist Thought recognizes the varying lived experiences of Black women, notes how each experience is unique, and formulates ideas based on that lived experience. For example, the wealth gap which sets Black women apart from their white male counterparts. Black women typically earn less, but also are frequently single parents who also must provide for a family including children, thus making for significant financial hardship (Muhammed 50).

The third distinguishing feature Collins identifies is the connection between Black women's experiences as a heterogeneous collectivity and any ensuing group knowledge or

standpoint (Collins 33). For her, self-defined standpoints can stimulate resistance (33). "[K]nowledge for the sake of knowledge is not enough-- Black Feminist thought must both be tied to Black women's lived experience and aim to better those experiences in some fashion" (Collins 35). With this in mind, from my perspective, Collins is making a call to put Black feminist thought to work.

The fourth distinguishing feature of Black Feminist thought is that it recognizes the essential contributions of Black women as intellectuals (Collins 37). Collins states that Black women intellectuals provide a unique angle, concerning Black Womanhood, unavailable to other groups (39). Collins posits that it is more likely for Black women as members of an oppressed group to have critical insights into the condition of Black women's oppression than it is for those who live outside of those structures. Black women are less likely to walk away from Black women's struggles when the obstacles seem overwhelming or when the rewards for staying diminish. According to Collins, Black women intellectuals from all walks of life must aggressively push the theme of self-definition-- speaking for oneself and crafting one's own agenda is essential to empowerment (Collins 40). Self-definition is key when talking of Butler's *Parable* (1993). Collins speaks of the importance of maintaining one's self definition, and the importance of finding voice (111). Collins states "Extended families, churches, and African-American community organizations are important locations where safe discourse can occur" (Collins 111). That is to say that providing safe spaces for Black women's expression allow for the discovery and nurturing to establish one's voice.

We now have the few distinguishing features that I plan to use for my analysis. Collins situates the experience and knowledge of African-American women as crucial to the purposes of Black Feminist Thought. In addition to Collins' theory, I would like to restate the definitions of

Afrofuturism as I have come to understand it. Afrofuturism is an aesthetic within an artistic medium, such as visual art, music, and literature (Womack, Anderson, Gaskins); it revises history to speculate the future (Gaskins); it imagines that future particularly in terms of African-American involvement in various forms of social justice (Cluett); and provides a means for individuals to seek liberation from oppressive conditions and ideologies through imagination, African mythology, and visualizing possibilities for self-determination (Mbewe, Womack, Cluett).

The subject of our analysis in this chapter is Octavia E. Butler's *Parable of the Sower,* particularly, its central character. Before demonstrating Black Feminist Thought and Afrofuturism in this novel, I offer brief summary to help those who have not yet read this class dystopian story. This first-person narrative begins with the protagonist, Lauren Olamina. The story begins in the year 2024, and according to Lauren, she lives in a community, specifically a cull de sac that is encased with a wall around it. Her father is a Baptist minister who holds sermons in the front room of their home, and she largely does not like to participate (6). Lauren is the oldest of her siblings, and she has a condition known as hyperempathy. Meaning that she can feel the pain of others if she sees other people in pain (9). She even states how difficult it is to ride her bike passed the homeless, and seeing them in pain (9). Her stepmother, Cory, teaches out of the home, and holds a PhD, as does her father, who is also a dean. According to Lauren, her father doesn't like to highlight that she lives with hyperempathy syndrome on account of the fact that it was the result of her mother doing drugs (10). Ultimately, Lauren keeps a journal of her thoughts and feelings, and this journal becomes a religion; a philosophy that she later names "Earthseed." She does not, then, hold the same faith as her father (in spite of the fact that she preaches one of his sermons after her father disappears).

Lauren's story of survival begins when she discusses the possibility of having to leave their walled-in community on account of the rampant violence (48-51). In a conversation with her childhood friend, Joanne, she explains the importance of having a plan for the sake of surviving a potential attack on the community, and tells her friend that she has been studying to live of the land in the event that she has to flee (50). Lauren attempts to plan ahead, has knowledge, and is busy acquiring a skill set that would allow her to survive outside of her community.

Lauren's faith, "Earthseed", features the idea of leaving Earth, and colonizing other planets. However, in the beginning of her quest for survival, even she wonders if her new faith is merely philosophical, or if any of it is real (23). Ultimately, her community is burned to the ground, and she has to flee. Upon fleeing her community, she loses touch with the surviving members of her family and must learn to survive with her two remaining community members, Harry and Zahra (147). During their travels to head North, Zahra teaches Lauren how to live outside of their now burned community. They meet people along the way in an effort to move out of the area due to drug use, and add them to their community

Lauren falls for a man she meets along the way North, and begins a relationship. She then establishes a community with her new companion, as well as the various travel companions she has made along the way. At the end of the story, she names the community "Acorn" (295).

Now that we have a brief synopsis of the book, I can begin my full analysis of the novel using Black Feminist Thought. I will use the distinguishing features of Black Feminism and several examples from *Parable* to make connections between the story and the theory.

Lauren lives at the intersections of being Black and poor, so class plays a direct factor in her life. She talks, for example, about how the only way they can get around is on bikes because

gas is so expensive. Due to the massive violence, no one can leave the community alone. When people do leave, they go in groups, and they are armed (7). Because of the situation she is living in, Lauren decides to prepare for not only an eventual attack on the community, but also, due to the harsh conditions of the planet, believes that it is better for the human race to leave (68). She speaks throughout the novel of leaving the planet as a means to start over; I argue that her feeling and facing this need to start over is a form of activism. This is not simply a form of self-preservation but also a mean to preserve human life as well. Essentially, her argument makes her an eco-activist.

Remember, this *Parable* isn't just a Black Feminist piece, but is an Afrofuturist work as well. This is not only highlighted by the virtue of this being a science fiction novel authored by a Black woman and centering a Black female character. The definitions of Afrofuturism highlighted earlier can make the case for this work being Afrofuturist. Visualizing a dystopian future is part of this idea in which the Black experiences is expressed and used to fight for social justice. In this piece, social justice issues, such as, environmentalism and drug use, are magnified as two major themes which inevitably destroy the community and families of the main protagonist. Afrofuturism is present here because Butler centers social justice as the main catalyst for the narrative. Butler utilized Afrofuturism as a means to provide a new way of talking about social justice topics and placed it within a science fiction context.

Furthering my argument of *Parable* being a Black Feminist text, is how her ideas about the importance of preparation for survival are eventually suppressed because of others fear. Lauren explains to her friend Joanne the idea she has of preparing to leave the community in the event of an attack, and possibly making her way North:

> I'm trying to learn whatever I can that might help me survive out there. I think we should all study book like these. I think we should bury money and other necessities in the ground where thieves won't find them. I think we should make emergency packs- grab and run packs- in case we have to get out of here in a hurry. Money, food, clothing, matches and blanket… I think we should fix places outside where we can meet in case we get separated. (51)

In this passage, we can see that Lauren is deeply intelligent, and she is desperate to craft a plan for survival. Because Lauren lives in a low-income community where several people are bound to small houses, and she sees and hears the state of violence, her personhood, the fact that she is Black and poor, gives her a unique perspective that her friend Joanne could not appreciate. It is later revealed that Joanne tells her own father about the things she and Lauren discussed, and Joanne's father becomes angry, and he tells Lauren's father about the conversation. Lauren even goes on to state that her own father was upset, and was going to have to have one of his stern talks with her (54). Her father says, "Things like this frighten people. It's best not to talk about them" (56). Mind you, Lauren is trying to devise a plan that could save her life, and the lives of others in the event of an attack, but because people find her ideas frightening, she is asked to be quiet (56). This plays directly with Collins's discussion of voice, and safe space within the context of self-definition. Collins suggests that supportive spaces such as churches and other communal areas can help foster voice within and for Black women (Collins 111). Because the space Lauren had with Joanne had a violation of trust with Joanne's father learning of Lauren's plan, and thus telling Lauren's father, there was direct violation of trust and the trust of the safe space Lauren had with Joanne. The revealing of Lauren's plan for survival ultimately took away Lauren's voice by her father silencing her ideas to maintain comfort in the community. In spite

of her father's decry that she should not be discussing an impending attack, she turns to her journal, and continues to write her new-found religion/philosophy.

Lauren's father asking her not to talk about planning for a potential attack, ties directly with the suppression of Black women's intellect. I make this argument because, here, we have a Black woman whom has studied survival tips, and who has formulated solid and inventive ways to potentially survive an attack on her community. Nonetheless, she is being told that she shouldn't talk about these things because the subject matter scares people (56-57). In fact, this suppression is so present, that her father, a reverend, and professor, makes her promise not to discuss this concept of survival anymore (57).

Lauren, however, will not be silenced. Continuing in her self-definition, Lauren makes the case for how she came to the name of the faith/philosophy of Earthseed. Lauren tells us that she came to the name while working her family's garden, and was thinking of how plants seed themselves far from their parent plants (68). She thinks there will be more people in her movement, and they will all "seed ourselves from farther and farther from this dying place" (69). She goes on to say that never felt as though was making it up; she feels that it is more of a discovery. She says, "Discovery rather than invention, exploration rather than creation" (69). In an act of self-definition, she has defined her faith. Lauren has defined it, named it, and argued that her ideas have always existed. Discovery rather than invention. This is important to know; in Lauren, Butler has created a Black intellectual who lives with the intersections of class, gender, and race, and now has created a religion. The safe space in which she finds her voice, using her voice and agency, isn't within the typical public sphere, isn't within a church, but within a journal of her own thought while tending a garden. It is from her experience with violence,

pollution, and the recognition of a dying planet that she makes the case for furthering the human experience beyond Earth: “The destiny of Earthseed is to take root among the stars” (75).

Lauran’s determination and agency are the key elements that make this character so important; the ways in which she defines not only herself but also her faith. Considering that her means for survival have been silenced, who can she share her ideas with? That is what makes the use of voice so important. Her voice is her journal; her journal contains her faith.

Lauren’s experience with her faith doesn’t end there. Collins argues that the lived experience of Black women is key to their ideas and intellect. It is through Lauren’s lived experience that she develops her faith and survival plans. As time goes on, Lauren recognizes the dire situation, particularly when her brother Keith runs away (87). Although he visits regularly while her father is away (92-93), eventually the unthinkable happens: her parents have to identify her brother’s body after (99).

Lauren sensed in advance that her community would face ever-increasing violence like that which killed her brother. This is why she devised an escape plan for the purpose of her survival. Using the concepts she read about, the ideas she had were based on how those concepts would play out in her lived experience. To even read the books, to seek out the knowledge shows that understanding ideas is directly connected to lived experience. This is expressed when her father disappears (115). It is then she has to preach her the sermon at her own father’s memorial (119). She shows how brilliant she is by selecting the sermon that maintains the idea that “the weak can overcome the strong” (119). I say this is brilliant because it shows how motivated and tactful she is. Her community has lost one of their leaders, her father. However, she it putting the needs of the community and her family before her own by lifting up the memory of her father,

thus inspiring a community. Perhaps this makes her more so brave, compassionate, and inspiring than anything else.

Not long after her father's memorial, her community is attacked, and all the homes are burned to the ground (137). After escaping the attack on her home by drug users, she loses track of the rest of her brothers and her stepmother, and is separated. Upon leaving the scorched ruins of her community, Lauren finds two of her now former neighbors, Harry and Zahra. Throughout the rest of the book, Zahra give Lauren tips and tricks to stay alive outside of the community once their home is burned down. This situates Black feminist thought perfectly. In this situation, we have two Black women with various forms of knowledge between them, and they both have their survival at heart. But it is their different knowledges that make the difference. Lauren has survival skills that she learned from reading books and playing with her father's computer. Zahra has survival skills because she once lived outside of the community. Zahra even goes so far as to tell Harry, and Lauren, "you're both babies out here" (154). Lauren even refers to Zahra's lived experience as an "alien past" (165). Zahra's knowledge is through her lived experience, and nothing more. Zahra reveals that she can't read, so her knowledge is based on the life has she lived. Her experience as a Black woman is not the same as Lauren's. Her skill set is not the same as Lauren's, and vice versa. But regardless of their differences, they appreciate each other's knowledge. They all have to depend on each other in order to survive, so they value individual contributions to their collective knowledge base. Though I wouldn't call Lauren's knowledge set academic, it is most certainly unique. She comes from a place of privilege in that both of her parents were teachers, and thus she knows how to read. However, even despite her privilege, essentializing Lauren's and Zahra's experience as identical would be inaccurate.

Along with the ideas of self-definition and determination, there lies the relationship that Lauren establishes with an older Black man by the name of Bankole. Bankole is old enough to be her father, and yet she still pursues him. After the first time they have sex, they speak of her age, and she reveals that she is only eighteen years old (Butler 239). When Bankole resists, she insists they not stop seeing or talking to each other on the sole basis of age. Near the end of the novel, they make it to their destination, some property that Bankole owns. The tragedy is that Bankole's sister and the family that had been there with her have been killed, and the property burned to the ground. But Lauren, and her fellow travelers make the decision to stay there and rebuild (294). It is then, after burying the remains of Bankole's extended family, that she names their new settlement "Acorn" (295).

At this moment, we see her embodying self-definition. Going back to the ideas of seeds, similar to when she was in the garden and came up with the name "Earthseed," she uses her knowledge and her ideas to name the very settlement the group takes as their own. This settlement that came about because of her motivation, ideas and plans for survival.

With examples for the distinguishing features of Black Feminist Thought, and with the definitions of Afrofuturism, when can make a few assertions. Considering the gap of publication between Patricia Hill Collins's theoretical frame work of Black Feminist Thought, and Mark Dery's term that is Afrofuturism, we can see that Octavia Butler was ahead of her time. The fact Butler's parable displays the tenets of both Black Feminist Thought and Afrofuturism, Butler's work displays the avant la lettre of these two frameworks.

Butler did one other thing that is essential to Black Feminist thought: she centered the knowledge and lived experiences of Black women. Lauren's stepmother, Cory, is not Black (she is Latina), but as far as Lauren and Zahra are concerned, it is their collective lived experience

that enables them to survive. In addition to that, the element that makes this an Afrofuturist piece, is how Butler centers the experience of Black women in the future itself, within a science fiction context. Womack argues that Afrofuturism is a Black Feminist framework that centers the experiences of Black women and their ideas in a science fiction context and aesthetic. I argue that this aesthetic is significant to writing science fiction. Including elements of Black feminism in a way that I have never seen it. Octavia E. Butler showed what life could be like in the future for Black women. She has showed that Black women can be well read outside of the realm of academia. Butler showed us that Black women are capable of conceptualizing space travel, even without formal education. She showed us that Black women can have multiple and varied lived experiences on a personal level, and that is significant. She placed it all thirty years into the future. She used what she knew of the state of the world to make a fair and just assessment of what the world would be like in the year 2024. I feel that what she gave us, is a piece of hope in the face of disaster; hope and perseverance in the face of adversity; self-definition in the face of silence.

Butler was once quoted in saying: "The one thing that I and my main characters never do when contemplating the future is give up on hope. The very act of trying to look ahead to discern possibilities and offer warnings is in itself an act of hope" (McIntyre, et. al 3). Though the future may be grim; may be rife with violence, starvation, income inequality, and hardship; thanks to the work of Octavia E. Butler, the future does indeed come with hope. People often wonder how Octavia E. Butler was able to predict the concerns future. I theorize that while Butler may have been hopeful, she did not expect the issues she wrote about to go away over-night. That is to say, issues with drugs, violence, wealth inequality, and climate change were topics of discussion at the time of publication, and they continue to play roles in this novel. It is my belief that Butler

didn’t actually predict the future per se; she just didn’t expect these problems to go away. Butler must have known that oppression takes many forms, and has many roots in the system. She took the situations African Americans are living in every day, and placed it in to a speculative fiction context in a way that would become known as both Black Feminist thought and Afrofuturism. The seeds of her own creativity, then, continue to travel and influence work, including Janelle Monáe and my own.

CHAPTER 4

IBIS AND OLU: AN AFROFUTURIST COMIC BOOK

As a performer, I draw together my interest in Afrofuturism- especially as it manifests in music and science fiction, by making staged work. I do so partly to explore Afrofuturism, and part to help others encounter and make sense of this aesthetic.

In this chapter, I would like to discuss the script to my solo performance, *Ibis and Olu: An Afrofuturist Comic Book*. I offer a preface to the script, and provide the full script to the show as well. This performance was years in the making, and was my first solo performance in the Marion Kleinau Theater. This opportunity was one of the greatest blessings I have had as a performer. With that said, allow me to provide context for the performance itself.

The purpose of the show was to create a comic book onstage, and use Afrofuturism as springboard to provide a testimony of my experiences with social justice and media imagery on the Black community. I did so by talking about my experience growing up in low-income housing in Southern Illinois; Harrisburg, to be exact. It was important that I lay out how living in such a poverty-stricken area can have a profound effect on a growing child. From there, I took the opportunity to reveal how the mediated imagery to which I had access in that environment was limited, and insufficient. I explained how in the midst of this lack, I found hope in the image of a Black, female superhero: "Storm," from Marvel Comics' *X-Men* franchise. Using this character's images, I discuss her impact, on how I makes sense of the issues which affected me at this time during my childhood; living in poverty, being a queer child, having insufficient school teachers, facing the school to prison pipeline, and losing my home to gentrification.

To further illustrate the impact these topics, and mediated imagery, I created two comic book-styled super heroes to perform as onstage: Ibis and Olu. I decided to call the show *Ibis and Olu:*

An Afrofuturist Comic Book because it was my intention to create a performance that appeared as though it were a comic book on stage. It was my intention to do so with lighting and staging, which were wonderfully executed with the help of the Marion Kleinau Staff: Jake Beck, Jason Hedrick, and Alex Davenport. Positioning the lights in a specific way, using intense deep colors allowed us to create the look of comic book panels onstage. This way, the scene as either character, we distinguished by virtue of this intense lighting. I used the characters to take today's issues, and place them in the future. Knowing my definitions of Afrofuturism, from Chapter One, you will see that in the script I have drawn on narratives from history to speculate the future of the world, and in particular the Black community. Creating two queer, Black, identical twin brothers in a dystopian future, I used past trauma to give these characters, and their mother, super human powers that comment on struggle: a powerful voice, access to knowledge, and the ability to see the future. These abilities communicate the historical trauma of being Black in America: the slave trade, Jim Crow, police sanctioned violence, prison industrial complex, the school-to-prison pipeline, etc.

The show allowed me to embody the performance studies goal of being both actor and activist (Pelias and VanOosting 226). Performing my own story of growing up Black and gay in small town America, while also performing as the two super heroes allowed me to speculate about the future. It isn't that believe things won't change for the Black community; I wrote this dystopian future with the idea that there is a chance things won't change if we remain complacent about the issues my community faces. I am offering hope that people like me will always be there to fight oppression. The following is the textual script to my solo performance, *Ibis and Olu: An Afrofuturist Comic Book.* I do not include stage direction, allowing readers uninterrupted access to the narratives offered by myself and the two characters. I the following

and final chapter, I review Afrofuturism and reflect on how the experience of making and performing the show revealed things I will expand and or alter in other was in future incarnations of the project.

Ibis and Olu: An Afrofuturits Comic Book

"This is Me"

Growing up in Southern Illinois wasn't the worst thing, but it wasn't the best. The best was reserved for the popular kids, the athletes, the pretty kids, the kids in the country clubs. It may economically have been the best for the kids whose parents were lawyers, teachers, cops, etc. But when you live in the projects and need something to cling to, you will look just about anywhere. You'll cling to anything that can give you so hope. You'll stick to that hope like the flour that stuck to my grandmother's fried chicken in her cast iron pan. You'll stick to it like the neighborhood drunk always play dominoes on the front stoop. You'll stick to it the same way the popular kids stick to the script of bullying the little guy. You'll stick to it because you're searching for something, searching for an image of yourself in something meaningful, powerful, important, and positive. Because you want to see yourself in the future, in any capacity.

I grew up in the projects, not the kind you would see in a major city but the kind in a small town. The kind you don't see much of in the media unless you're watching a Beyoncé video. Growing up in the projects, I learned many things. Like what it meant to live in the projects, itself. In my home town of Harrisburg, a town just an hour East of this theatre here in Carbondale, there were two sets of projects: one on the North side of town, and one on the Southside. Even for a town of roughly ten thousand, there were two distinct sides, and of course, it was divided by railroad tracks. When people asked what projects I lived in, some would ask,

"Do you live in Wilmoth Edition, or do you live on Barnette Street." Others would ask, "Do you live in the Black projects, or the White projects?" The ones I lived in where, of course, the Black projects. And this simply wasn't an accident.

My parents divorced when I was four years old, and we lived in section 8 housing (that is housing rented to impoverished or low-income families at below market rate) in a small town not too far from Harrisburg called Carrier Mills. Of course, when I say “we,” I mean my mother, my two older brothers, and myself. The house, suffice it to say, wasn't the best. The plumbing/sewage typically backed up, and we had to pee in plastic tumbler cups instead of the toilet. So, my mother, Barbra, called her mother, my grandmother, Rosa. My grandmother worked for the housing authority in our little town. They helped the impoverished find places to live and, in some cases, helped them get on public aid, apply for food stamps, find work, etc. My grandma Rosa, was a combination of a badass and a saint and managed to raise eleven children in a two-bedroom apartment, got mom signed up, out of the sewage and regret filled house, and into an apartment just like hers. In fact, we moved in to the apartment right next to Grandma’s. Now, because my parents were divorced, my dad moved to Harrisburg to be closer to us. And in the summer’s we got to stay with his mother, my grandmother Brenda. We spent the summers with her and my grandfather Harlan, who was a coal miner. They lived in Carrier Mills, about 7 to 10 miles south of Harrisburg. Frequently my grandmother would take us into town with her to buy things: cooking supplies, KFC, whatever she was in the mood for. On one particular day, she decided to take us into town for bullets. She had a gun in her night stand, and she had threatened one of her neighbors and emptied her 357. She fired it into the sky as a means to frighten said neighbor when he got a little too close to her fence. When you live on a farm in Southern Illinois, apparently you can do things like that. So, I’m around eight years old, and

Granny takes us to Wal-Mart to buy bullets for her gun. Now my brother Gabe and I where the only two of the grandchildren who were with her. And frequently, when she took us to the store, she would let us go to the toy section to simply look around. She'd say, "Not to pick something out, but to simply look around." So, we were off!

We made it to the toy section, and Gabe had found some model cars and G.I. Joes that he loved, such as Barricade, and Duke. I was just looking; just browsing, not sure what I wanted to find, but then I saw something. I felt drawn to one particular set of action figures. The boxes said "X-Men," and I had never seen them before. I didn't know what they were about, but one struck me dead in my tracks. She was a Black woman, with white hair, and white eyes,in a silver suit with a lightning bolt down the center. The box said, "Uncanny X-Men Marvel Super Heroes: Storm." When I lifted my jaw off the floor, I picked up the action figure and was in awe. I had never seen a super hero like her before. I found a niche; I found something to be interested in. And I was excited, and also a tad bit obsessed.

As time went on, I began to study her, and the comic book series, *X-Men*. I learned her real name was Ororo Monroe, and she was an immigrant from North Africa. Her parents (her father an American Photo journalist and her mother a Kenyan Princess) were killed when a plane crashed into their home when she was just a child. She was buried in the rubble with her parents, and watch her mother die, which led to her being a claustrophobic; a phobia I share with her. I read about her struggle with small spaces and admired her strength. After surviving the death of her parents, she became a pick pocket on the streets of Cairo, working under the oppression of a powerful psychic called the Shadow King. Once the Shadow King was defeated by leader of the *X-Men*, Charles Xavier (who by the way didn't know her until years later), she escaped and began a pilgrimage that lead to her crossing the Sahara Desert. She almost died from the heat,

and that activated her mutant powers. She made it rain when she was thirsty and since that day, she was immune to the extremes of heat and cold. She was Black, a woman, and quite powerful. I had never seen anything like her in comic books or action figures. I saw a part of myself in her. That's when I began to see my own life as one big comic book.

I saw each life event as an issue and every moment, as action going from one panel to the next, and to the next, until you get to the last one that said, "To be continued" or simply "End." Now, for years, I was raised around Superman, you know, this beautiful hunk of a man who was always in tights and was an alien, at that. I really couldn't identify with this character, and in many ways, I still can't. I'm not tall, White, with huge muscles and wavy Black hair; I'm not that standard of beauty. Then there is Batman, an orphaned billionaire whose parents were senselessly murdered. Long story short, he chose to fight crime dressed as a bat. I mean, yeah, he had billions of dollars; he could have donated to police organizations, and what have you, but no. Let's use our inherited wealth to make nifty gadgets and fight crime. Never mind working with police and the citizens who actually live in crime stricken communities, I'ma dress like a bat and do it my damn self. Boo, what? Sometimes I liked him because he just looks bad ass, and others I just thought he was a tad bit over rated. But Storm was the first for me: the first time I saw anyone like me who was a leader, who was powerful. Who was femme and could still kick a lot of ass when the moment called for it. I became so focused on her, I began to imitate her while playing on the playground outside our apartment. I would raise my hand to the sky and try my best to make it rain, or snow, make tornadoes, hurl bolts of lightning. I wanted these powers, especially when it came to fighting with bullies at school, *and* at home. Nothing says, "Don't fuck with me" like being able to fry your ass like my grandmother's catfish. Yes, I'm country.

Storm was the only way I could see myself as a hero of any kind. Other boys at school and in the neighborhood would pretend to be Chuck Norris, or Bruce Lee, or even Wolverine, and I'm just over here trying to make it rain. Once it caught on how much I loved Storm, my grandmother Rose decided to give me an excellent gift. Back when I was a kid, you could buy a stack of comics through JC Penny. And one Christmas, that's exactly what she did. I got a stack of comics that Christmas, and it was arguably almost as tall as me. What's more, the majority of the issues were about her: Storm. Now, to keep my shit pristine, I got comic book protectors, and I kept them in my closet to keep my brothers from tearing them apart. You know, because older siblings can be dicks, and that's just what they do. It was a shame that I was confined to the bedroom closet of my room to enjoy this universe. I began to read that there were other Black heroes, but she was mine. She was a part of me now. And more importantly, she let me use my imagination. These comics talked about real life issues: government rules of segregation, registration of particular demographics of people, government testing on people. Things I didn't know happened in reality.

Revisiting these comics and these story lines as an adult, I appreciate them so much more than I did as a child. It was actually some stupid-ass Buzzfeed quiz that made me wonder, if I had a super power, what would it be? I came up with two powers that I found to be fitting for me: my voice and the absorbing of knowledge through touch, because grad school. Knowing what I know, I knew these powers had to be distributed to more than one person. Because both came from me, I thought it would be best if they were bothers. Much like Charles Xavier and Magneto, one is slightly more peaceful, and the other… not so much. I think it's time you met one of them.

"This is Him: Ibis"

I know you're there. I know how this works! Can we please just get this over with? Send in your good cop/bad cop pair so I can go! Please! Look, I don't know where my brother is or what he's up to. I had nothing to do with those two testing facilities; please just let me go, for fuck sake. Look, I know there are cameras in here, and I know you're recording so before you decide to throw me away to solitary confinement without due process, because I know how this shit works, I want to ask you a question. Have you any idea how humiliating it is to be taken by the police from your office in front of your colleagues and students. Because that's just what the world needs: another evolved negro in handcuffs being carried off a college campus instead of being brought in to teach. Do you know what seeing this will do to students of color?

Fine. Here's what I know. I know I was born thirty-four years ago on Valentine's Day, just before midnight. Twins. My mother had this unique ability. If she touched someone, anyone, she could see their future instantly. She told me a man tried to mug her once. When she fought him off in self-defense, she saw his future. She told him, "If you do this the police are going to kill you." He didn't heed her warning. She said that she saw his story on the news two days later. She said she began to wear gloves more often. She came up with this excuse that she had poor circulation, and her hands were always cold. So, imagine how she feels1 when she holds her twin boys for the first time, and gets some of the worst news anyone could give her. She saw what would become of us, and then she immediately began the process to rail against it. But she embraced part of the idea of her children being two of the evolved, like her, and like her mother before. We have a long lineage of it, and we're not the only ones. My mother hoped my powers wouldn't manifest until adulthood, because she didn't know how to raise two super-powered children. However, she did her best. When I was three years old, she asked me to pick up a book

for her to read to me, and when I picked it up I told her, "How about I read it to you; I know how it ends." I have the ability to read text just from picking it up; I absorb knowledge through touch. I know a variety of things because of it, so it comes as no surprise I would grow up to major in history. My mother named me Ibis. You see, my mother taught Egyptian mythology. The Egyptian god of knowledge is Toth, and his head is that of an Ibis, the bird. Toth was also the God of the Full Moon. Guess what phase it was on February, 14th 2014. That's where she got my name. My brother was named Olu, which is the Igbo word for "voice," and you know what he can do. When we were kids, my mother insisted that we keep our powers to ourselves, so as to not be targets for experimentation. When Olu was seven he fell from the bunk beds in our house. When he screamed, he shattered all the windows, and ruptured both of my ear drums. It was then my mother knew she was in for her worst nightmare. Though my powers came a few years before Olu's, it was still important to her that she protect him more so than me. My powers could be slightly muted, but his were raw emotion, bare, immediate. When we were teens, I had an accident. I knew I had the ability to absorb information through text, but I didn't know what would happen the first time I touched a computer that was attached to the internet. It overloaded my brain, and I fell into a coma. It was a stroke. A very deep brain hemorrhage happened, and when I was under, I wasn't here to protect my little brother. He had quit talking, because when he did, it destroyed everything within a certain radius. The older he became, the worse his scream became, the more destructive. We were two of only a handful of Black students at our school, and coupled with the fact we're both queer, we were targets, especially the one of us who wouldn't talk.

A week after I fell into a coma, he was attacked by a group of jocks. When he screamed at his bullies, they were killed instantly, and a wing of our high school was destroyed. When the

police arrived, he was taken away. We were fifteen years old, and I haven't seen him since then. This was why our mother tried to protect us. Because in 2016 it was discovered that slavery changed the DNA of Black folks. The trauma mutated our DNA; it was a case of adapt or die. They think that is what caused this in some of us. That manipulation gave us gifts, and they began to call us "the evolved." In 2018 Congress passed a law that allowed for random testing of people they believed to be one of the evolved. Then, in 2021, they began the registration of evolved individuals and drafting them for the military. It was later discovered that we were being weaponized. Some politicians did nothing for us, even though they knew it was happening. It was around that time my mother tried to keep our abilities muted. When I awoke from my coma, Olu was in custody, and I had to learn how to talk all over again. But that didn't keep me from graduating from high school. My mother would make me wear gloves when I studied so I didn't know more than my classmates or teachers. That secrecy earned me the privilege to graduate from college at an early age, go forth to graduate school, and then start teaching. I've been teaching history and government for ten years, trying to keep my powers to myself. Now here I am. I know Olu escaped, but he has not contacted me. He hasn't been in touch, and I don't know where he is. I have built too good of a life for myself to throw it away.

My mother would beg to differ, but she taught me that, if you fit in to their standards, you survive. I did everything right, and now I know my people won't see me after today. So please just do me this favor: please let me call my office and tell them class is cancelled for the rest of the week, and please let me call someone to feed my dog.

“Back to Me: Caleb”

So, growing up Black and gay, it was nice to get lost in comics. Because when you’re a child in the projects, and you’re being told that who you are is a problem, you may do whatever the hell you have to do to just get by. So, I stayed confined in the closet where I kept my comic books. I was restricted to a small space just for the sake of survival, but it was most certainly oppressive. That small space was rather troubling because of my claustrophobia, but it felt safer than rest of the world. If I need to escape to another universe, my closet was the door there, which is ironic because, in our housing project, a lot of the closets didn’t even have doors. So, the privacy and security was a limited one. The closet I was confined to still somehow felt safer. That’s why, when I found out there was an X-Men cartoon, I lost my shit. Saturday morning cartoons were for me! 10:00 a.m. every Saturday morning, I’d turn on channel 10, and sit and wait for the amazing, and infectious theme song to *X-Men*. I would dance, and I would get chills whenever Storm would hit the scene. She was so freaking theatrical; she was more than I imagined. She wouldn’t just make lightening show up, it was, “I SUMMON THE POWER OF LIGHTNING!” She would raise her hands to the sky, calling it into existence, her eyes white with power, her teeth gritting, her white hair flowing in the wind as a direct display of her rage! Excuse me, I got a little carried away there. When it came time to fight, and by the way, most of the time that she and the rest where fighting, it wasn’t with other heroes; it was actually with authority figures: police, military, White supremacists. Hell, in one episode, she created a tornado to stop a group of segregationist. She inspired me. It was amazing to see a hero fight injustice in such a variety of ways. Of all the things she could do, I was jealous of the fact that she could fly. Some Afrofuturists-authors, scholars, activist, artists who write about seeing Black people in the future in a science fiction aesthetic-say that when writers talk about Black people

flying, it is seen as a form of liberation. Seeing her fly made me so jealous because I couldn't imagine how freeing that was, to have the very wind at your command, to call upon it to lift you and carry you wherever you wish. She was everything.

Of course, there is a downside. Around this time my grades started to slump, and my parents became concerned. They decided that I was becoming too focused on comic books and that I should focus more and school. Of course, they were well meaning, but they did the worst thing they could do. They went into my little world, and took my comic books. Yes, this is the moment of "THEY TOOK MY TOYS!" I feel that. I recognize it. I get it. But when you're already told you don't fit in and they take the one thing that you can identify with, damn, that shit hurts. Of course, the teachers said I needed to focus more on reading. IRONY LIKE A MOTHERFUCKER! Because nothing says you need to read and use your imagination more than authority figures taking your comic books and hindering your imagination. What am I supposed to do now? They simply said, "Go outside. It's a beautiful day." And there I was, with nothing, not even my trading cards, still confined in a closet. My grandmother, Rosa, was pissed. They took the universe she bought me away, and to this day I still don't know where that universe is. I became depressed, and teachers had no problem telling me that I needed to straighten up or I wouldn't' go anywhere, wouldn't go far, I would end up in prison. True story! It was around that time we also found out that our home was being taken away. For the purposes of development and progress, our home was being torn down for a highway. The highway is there, but it doesn't go through area where my home was. But you can see the highway from where my kitchen used to be. What interesting is the area the city of Harrisburg calls the business district just happens to be where the youth prison is.

When you're growing up during a time where one of the few Black men you see on t.v. is Rodney King getting his ass savagely beat, you seek something else out. But then you're told you can't, because it's distracting. I know what you're thinking: "What about Martin Luther King, or Malcom X, or Rosa Parks? They were heroes!" Well, in my school system we were only allowed to talk about them for one month out of the academic year without scrutiny, so what can you do? Besides, two of these heroic activists were killed. Storm was practically immortal. What would happen if we talked about them in say, November? What do you do when you're told you can't go to college unless you're an athlete, or you're just prison bound? You try to resist; you try to fight those systems, systems that say you won't go to college unless you play football. Or you won't get a job unless you're a coal miner, so you should just give up on college all together? "Prison bound." Knowing this is all I heard, combined with the fact that the only home I've ever known was to be destroyed for a highway, I think it's time you met the brother.

"This is Him: Olu"

This is the day, Mama. This is the day you saw when Ibis was in his coma, when you touched me and held me and told me to remember. 12/3/45. December third, 2045.

1-2-3-4-5; Easy to remember.

I woke up in this blue motel, just like you said. Missing you. Missing Ibis. I've been waiting for it since I was fifteen, rehearsing it in this voice in my head, the way I sound just for me, not talking out loud so terrible things don't happen.

When you sent me to school that day and told me not to be afraid, I want you to know I tried. Did you see that? Could you see me trying when the bullies came, chanting their names for being

Black, queer, and evolved? It's funny, because I had begun to think you were wrong. I had made it through the day. But you were never wrong, were you? I'm counting on that today.

I let my guard down after school, around three in the afternoon. I was walking up to the gym entrance, because that was the easiest way to get to my locker. Five of them came out of the building before I made my way in. Could you see their faces, Mama? Or just mine, standing there, numb, looking at them all around me. I was blood in the water; I was their target. They punched me, kicked me called me the usual names: Nigger, faggot, bitch ass. They mocked us for living on the wrong side of the tracks. They said Ibis was gonna die and they could do whatever they wanted, now. One of them grabbed me after I was knocked to the ground. He pulled me up and twisted my arm behind me. He kept twisting, and twisting, and twisting, until I felt the bone snap like a twig under the flesh. That was when I screamed, Mama. That was when I lost control.

All five of them where killed instantly, but I was in another place. It's like I could see them come apart. It was horror. I didn't know I could cause such damage, then. I hadn't learned not to let my anger build up like that. Pieces of their bodies blew back like leaves, every cell in them feeling the shock of the sonic pulse. They liquefied, shattered like pierced water balloons. The gym behind them disintegrated as if it had been hit with a gale force wind from hell. I worried about the other students who were in the path of my scream. I passed out.

Did you see it, Mama? Did you see it like that, from inside? When you saw things, were you inside the person or watching them from outside, at a distance? I wonder sometimes if you're here with me now, next to me, seeing this. If you knew what I would think, or just what I would do. If you knew I'd talk to you the rest of my life like this. If you heard me say "I love you" all those times inside my head.

When I woke, handcuffed to that hospital bed, surrounded by all the military people there, I knew they were going to take me away. News was already out about their plans for the Evolved. They made me a weapon. I was harnessed, weaponized, dehumanized, and used for labor. For years, I lived as a slave to their will and their judgement of others. I killed for them. I fought for them. I was tortured for them. Our government has a history of experimenting on our people, you know, like Henrietta Lacks; the women of Puerto Rico, and their forced sterilization; and the men of Tuskegee, in the government's experiments with syphilis. And I was no exception. I was confined to a small space where all I had was my own thoughts until they needed me for their work, for their will. I waited. I learned what they taught me about how to control the force, how to direct it, just like you said. I practiced:

1-2-3-4-5

St. Louis PD.

When they used my voice to take out a small island off the coast of Africa, I knew it was time. The only thing they had to hold me back all those years was leverage. They said that they knew where my family was and that, if I didn't cooperate, you and Ibis would be right where I was. I stayed, and I suffered to protect my family. Isn't that always the way? Someone must suffer as an act of resistance so that others might live. They didn't know your power. They didn't know what you saw.

The day came closer and closer. I heard them talk about tracking Ibis. I waited for the right moment. When the right night came, I screamed at the top of my lungs and obliterated my cell door. I felt a great swell of guilt for a brief moment, hurting all of those people for purposes of my own freedom. But to feel fresh air in my lungs for the first time in a very long time was otherworldly. To get that first deep inhale of freedom, and let it fill every fiber of your being was

beyond words. When I ran through the streets, through fields, through memories, it was almost as though I was flying. I ran as fast as I could. I flew as fast as I could. I felt unstoppable.

I have been in hiding ever since. I've slept in boxes in alleys, abandoned cars and warehouses. But you saw it all. You know how it was to finally say I won't be hurt anymore, and I won't be used or objectified anymore. You knew the powers that be would never stop seeing the Evolved as a threat that must be done away with. So, I escaped. The folks in charge will always say the Evolved and our acts of protest are too violent, not worth the energy to understand, and that we should give up.

But I never gave up.

I practiced, just like you said: Easy to remember, 1-2-3-4-5.

St Louis PD.

Interrogation Room 3.

I had to hang on to hope when hope was lost, and I still fight, leaving graffiti and canvases wherever I can. I fight for those who are still used in labor, for those who are still captive, experimented on, killed because they were seen as a threat. I am no hero, but I must fight. If not me, then who? 2043, and I still have to fight this shit.

And just in case you couldn't hear it, just so I know that you saw it all those years ago, Mama [Mouths words: I Love You. Leave a space in the recording for saying that silently and taking a breath]

Now. I'm going to go get my brother.

(Play the distorted version of Strange Fruit).

We Black folks have even moved into the world of comic books, where a new issue of *Black Panther* was recently authored by writer and activist Ta-Nehisi Coates. We're taking these characters and telling our stories from our own perspectives. Even the new *Iron Man* is a black teenage girl named Ri Ri Williams. And in a recent issue, the cover of Iron Man featured her and the first black woman to own and run a comic book store on the East coast. Her name is Ariell Johnson.

Why do I talk about these things? Because my experience with the police, and the media has been traumatic. Just like this past summer. After the death of Philando Castille, I had a realization: No matter how you try to do things right, as a Black person, you're still at risk. This realization of always being seen as a threat came to me in a dream.

It is a morning like any other. I am dressed to the nines like I do, and I am driving to the Communications building like I always do. Then I see police lights in my rear-view mirror, and I begin to worry and panic a little. I told myself, "Just remain calm; do what the officer says and you'll be fine." I remembered that they teach classes in inner city schools, teaching Black students how to interact with the police. That may seem like it's a bit much, but when you turn on the news and there's another unarmed Black person being murdered, and another officer place on paid administrative leave, you begin to have nightmares. Anyway, in the dream that I am on Chautauqua Road, and I am searching for my insurance card, which I usually keep in the glove compartment. It was so vivid, I remember how the sunlight looked a little orange because it was just over the horizon, and my truck smelled like a Frebreeze/ Gain air freshener,a scent that reminded me of the first time I was pulled over by a state trooper. He wanted to search my car because I had a bottle of Frebreeze, and so he just knew I was carrying weed. In the dream, I had

on my favorite outfit: my blue sweater vest, my favorite dark blue jeans, my blue tie, and my blue Timberland boots (all of which match flawlessly), and a white dress shirt. So, I can see the officer's uniform in the review mirror as he is approaching my car, and I already have my I.D. out and the window rolled down so I can communicate with the officer effectively. But I'm reaching for the insurance card. It's then I hear three gunshots from behind me. They are loud, and quick, and it is over in an instant. I turn around, and all I can see is a smoking barrel and the uniform. I can't even see his face. I then look down and see blood and holes all over my blue sweater vest. I smell the blood; and I see my own blood splattered like a Jackson Pollock painting all over my dash board. I see my blood fill up the cup holders in the center console, and the leather upholstery of the passenger seat. I scream "I was grabbing my insurance card!! How could you do this? I am a husband, I have a family! Why did you do this?" I see my own blood in the passenger seat just before everything goes black. I assume I died. I honestly don't know how that scenario was supposed to play out, because I woke up before the dream/nightmare ended. I woke up unable to breathe, shaking, crying, sweating bullets. I was unable to put into words what I was feeling. Just know: This was the third time I had this dream in a matter of months. The third time I encountered a trigger-happy officer who thought that it was okay to end my life. I wrote about this experience so I wouldn't forget, but how can you forget your own state-sanctioned assassination when you've seen it three times? I thought, surely to God, this isn't a psychic dream. And then one day, something peculiar and unexpected happened.

The police were called on me one day, well, on my mother and I. We went to a neighborhood just off of Tower Road. My mother and I wanted to see a home that had been on the market for nearly a year. A truck pulled out in front of us, and we were behind them for about a block, but then we got to the house I wanted to see. Soon, we went to look at another home on

the opposite side of town on Giant City Road. When we got on Pleasant Hill Road, I received a phone call. It was the Carbondale police. They received a call from someone saying that I was following them. Someone wrote down my plate number, and apparently that links to my phone number. So, I told the operator that I was on Pleasant Hill Road, and I was willing to pull over and meet the police at the Arboretum. Two officers came, and they took my driver's license and my mother's identification. I explained to them that we were looking at homes for sale, and we didn't know what they were talking about.

We were in a predominately White neighborhood, and we were accused of suspiciously following someone we didn't even notice.

I suppose I should have known better than to be looking at a home in a nice neighborhood while Black. The police saw me shaking, and said they were just doing their job, but that didn't keep me from feeling scared. I am scared of the police.

So, this felt like proof that we can't do anything without someone (anyone) thinking we're a threat.

At the time, I didn't know if I should be here in Carbondale after this year, and if I am, I don't know where I could live without it being assumed I am a threat.

Because of that, I am afraid to shop for homes in particular neighborhoods. It took my mother and I a month and a half to get up the never to even drive by that neighborhood to look at the house we really like, but recognized we couldn't afford. I wondered, and even as I stand here onstage, I wonder, if this is how they treat us for being in the neighborhood just looking around, then how will they treat us should we be privileged enough to move in? After everything I've seen in the last for years, months, weeks, and days, I wouldn't rule out a hateful note saying you're not welcome here. Especially after realizing I knew the owner of the home, a retired

professor of Performance Studies right here at SIU. It was the home of Dr. Ronald J. Pelias; it was his home I was looking at when the cops were called on me. I wanted to see myself in the future, to see myself as a professor capable, privileged enough to look at that home in that neighborhood and make an offer, and someone saw me as a threat. The thought is terrifying, indeed. I am actively trying to resist the idea that I am a threat, and it is allowed that I am a target. It is allowed that, because I am seen as a less, I can be experimented on; there was a time that we were. It was allowable to lynch us in the street and photograph it as though you had just killed your first deer of the hunt. It is allowable to put is in solitary confinement with little to no human contact for an extended period of time.

So, this performance that brought you here is just me fighting, hoping, and working while I live in world where more people who look like me are imprisoned and killed by systematic injustice. This is the only way I know how to fight it. In spite of how daunting it may seem, if my story can give someone some hope, then this is all the better. When 40% of prisoners look like me, but there are fewer than 5,000 college instructors who look like me, I have to keep fighting. When the home I grew up in was torn down for the purposes of progress that never happened, I have to keep fighting. When the one person who believed in my interest, my grandmother Rosa, was taken from me before she could see me graduate college, I have to keep fighting. I have to learn, and I have to use my voice. No matter how hard the fight gets, no matter how hard it is, I will always keep moving to the future. I will keep thinking of the past, engaging with the present, and predicting the future of me, and my people. In the great comic book of my life, I will always be looking for the next issue and the next panel.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION: QUEERING AFROFUTURISM.

Afrofuturism has given me several I contemplate regularly. The most important of these is hope. Though hope is a feeling that I carry on a day to day basis, Afrofuturism has provided a new context in which I can hold on to it. I see matters made visible by Afrofuturism that make hope feel like a distant goal, but I also see the ways Afrofuturism becomes a wellspring of hope for anyone seeking a means to discuss social justice and rail against the status quo of oppression.

As I stated in Chapter One, Afrofuturism is needed in performance studies and can provide material that remedies the absence of literature reflecting Black experience in the canon. Afrofuturism also provides a useful and unique platform to give voice to actors hoping to become activist who discuss social justice issues in a unique and meaningful way. Afrofuturism also provides an opportunity for more diversity in performance in general, giving more space for Black actors and activists. However, Afrofuturism is not perfect, even though it can answer the call to include as yet non-canonical work, and provide more voices to the field of performance studies.

While researching Afrofuturism, I began to notice a theme within the writings I had found. Many of the authors who work within Afrofuturism discuss a host of topics that effect the Black community in a variety of ways. However, the one issue I have not seen as a topic of inquiry is Black queer identity. I feel this is a significant problem, especially because that one of the figures involved in the aesthetic of Afrofuturism is Black and gay. That is science fiction writer Samuel R. Delany. Delany is Black and openly gay, however there is very little discussion as to why or how he brings Black queer voices into his work. As an individual

identifying as both Black and queer, I find this neglect of Delany's sexuality rather harmful, and reductive. Delany was literally one of the authors interviewed by Mark Dery when the term Afrofuturism was coined, but when people talk about Afrofuturism, Delany's queer identity is never brought up, nor is his work in which queer identity is discussed.

Though Afrofuturism deals heavily in the scope of Black identity in the context of science fiction, Delany has work that is categorized as non-fiction and expresses his experiences with his sexuality. In an interview with author Junot Diaz, Delany talked about his recent essay in he described a sex party with friends (Diaz and Delany, "Radicalism"). Delany's autobiographical essay, *Ash Wednesday*, uses vivid detail of sexual encounters while also discussing the importance of his relationships (n.p.). With Diaz, Delany asserts what it could mean to have a sexual encounter mediated and how. Also, Delany reveals that this notion of a mediated sexual encounter is the core them of his book *Time Square Red, Time Square Blue* (Diaz n.p.). As far as being a sex radical (as Diaz poses in a question), Delany responds, "And, yes, all true radicalism has to begin in the body- so being a sex radical means you have to be ready to act radically and be willing to speak about it in place you ordinarily wouldn't- such as an interview you might otherwise confine to a journal" (Diaz n.p.). Delany makes this statement to normalize sexual activity; to discuss it in the open. Afrofuturism can be a part of this conversation in recognizing there is room for all stories and experiences of love and desire, and use these stories to continue the process of discussing social justice.

Not all hope is lost when it comes to queer identity and Afrofuturism, though. In all, the research I have done in two years, coupled with guidance from friends and faculty, I found one article in which queer identity and Afrofuturism were combined to discuss the work of a pop culture figure: disco singer Sylvester James (Anderson, "Fabulous"). Though the article was

important and eye opening, it was a shame that this was the only article I could find which centered Afrofuturism and visible Black queer identity.

Even E. Patrick Johnson writes of Black Queer Studies:

> Nonetheless, science fiction writer Samuel Delaney, poet and lesbian feminist Cheryl Clarke, black gay poet and activist Essex Hemphill, among others, were publishing fiction and poetry that reflected the lives of black LGBT folk as well as criticism that engaged the absence of Black LGBT studies in the academy and homophobia within black communities. (Johnson 52)

Here we have mention of Samuel R. Delany that acknowledges his Black queer work, raising up in a humanizing way. This acknowledgement of Delany's work and identity are crucial in the conversations which center Afrofuturism and the Black community. Afrofuturism can take the discourse of Black queer identity and enhance it in a way that no other discourse can. Afrofuturism has the potential to include queer identity within a context that makes narratives about queer identity in the Black community just as meaningful as the stories that center police violence, drug addiction, and the history of the straight Black community in America. Missy Elliott's work has even left the notion of her own sexuality ambiguous in many respects, while also enforcing the visual aesthetics of Afrofuturism. When we visualize a future in which we center social justice issues as well as re-envision and reclaim the past, it is key that we also include those who live at the margins of the Black community. We Black queer folks, just like everyone else, seek a future in which our bodies, intellects, and lived experiences are highlighted, cherished, and used as the topic of conversation. Even when we have conversations around Black Lives Matter in our current political landscape, people seem to forget that the

organizations leadership is "[L]argely queer and female" (Taylor 165). So, we can bring in more voices and still center social justice issues for everyone within the Black community.

My hope for Afrofuturism is also that it can reach a broad variety of areas of analysis. Afrofuturism is widely regarded in rhetoric, however I would love to see it as subject of investigation in the context of environmental rhetoric. Gray asserts that Queer ecology is cautionary about the assumptions of environmentalism (245). Meaning that those participating in environmentalism are typically actively reproducing heteronormativity (245). I posit that Afrofuturism could give us a Black Afrofuturist ecology. Meaning that not only are we breaking the social norms of the participants in environmentalism, but we are using that space to bridge a conversation between our ecosystems and the Black community. Which is to say, more Afrofuturist scholars, authors, and performers can do as Octavia E. Butler did, and attend carefully to environmental impacts on communities of color. If anything, I feel we could use performance studies to articulate these concerns and predictions as a means to discuss them in a current real-world context. Environmental work in performance studies (e.g., Gray; Fisher and Donahue) has emerged as a valued part of the discipline: Afrofuturism can expand this impact.

Afrofuturism is moving in the direction of creating social change and visibility in ways that were previously unattainable. More artists, authors, critics, and scholars are coming to the forefront to have a conversation. I realize now that these individuals, many of whom have been cited in this document, have always been present. Yet when we have conversation about science fiction, activism, visibility, Afrofuturism was previously not mentioned. Admittedly, I stumbled upon Afrofuturism by accident and became enamored of the movement and its work. We can discuss Afrofuturism in important ways which would include as many voices within the movement as possible.

To contribute to developing the power of Afrofuturism for performance studies, I turn now to what, on reflection, I would remake, alter, or in other ways, enhance my own show, *Ibis and Olu: An Afrofuturist Comic Book.* Doing so will help establish that, while I used Afrofuturism to help construct the show, I can also use it to improve the performance in future iterations. I have identified three elements and/or issues to improve, using Afrofuturism not just to generate, but also to regenerate, my work. Those elements are: Include more artists of the aesthetic in my work (e.g. talk about Monáe, Sun Ra, Butler), use media (primarily sound), and emphasize Afrofuturism tenets directly, rather than implying them. In *Ibis and Olu*, I talk briefly about comic books, but I didn't directly discuss artists who participate in the aesthetic. My performance runs roughly an hour, but in that time, I never name another artist. Another issue I would work to change would be the use of media; specifically, sound. In the fourth scene of the show, it is entirely voice over, but I never played an example of Afrofuturist music. The last issue I would address is the tenets of Afrofuturism. I would address them directly early on in the show as oppose to mentioning the tenets at the end of the show, while never bringing them up prior. Understanding the importance of this aesthetic, I must not only embody Afrofuturism, but discuss it in as much detail as possible.

In this thesis, I have explained why I feel performance studies can take this opportunity to join forces with Afrofuturism to create change. Together, Afrofuturism and performance studies can bring to light issues we have yet to cover, and the highlight issues that we are dealing with currently as a community. Performance is capable of centering the Black experience as well as the queer experience in theoretical and aesthetic projects. We, as performance studies scholars can queer the future by mixing Afrofuturism and Black queer identity in speculative ways. I attempted to do so with my solo performance *Ibis and Olu*, but there is so much more that could

and should be done to reach as many voices and perspectives as possible. Going back to Pelias and VanOosting, performance studies can provide a platform where the actor is also activist (226). This is not to say that performance isn't "enough," just that we can add Afrofuturism to performance studies' repertoire of methods and perspectives for critical inquiry and social examination. We can use Afrofuturism to speculate historical events, to change the way we view them, to engage with the present, and to predict or invent a new future. We can create these stories, adapt their literature for the stage, perform their poetry, and create a real revolution. Afrofuturism can work within the canon, within institutions, and within art, to create something new, to change something, and to create a new conversation. It is my wish that performance studies be a part of this work, of this aesthetic, of this movement. Performance Studies and Afrofuturism, together, can create a future we can all be a part of and walk forward in resistance together, to face a new horizon.

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