Did you say Afrofuturism? On labelling art

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In this section we would like to clarify Milumbe Haimbe’s association with the term Afrofuturism by defining the concept of this genre. We speak about the reappropriation of Afrofuturist aesthetics by contemporary artists and problematize the term itself as it is used to subsume Black artists with futuristic approaches within the conceptualization of exhibitions, panels, conferences and film screenings. Further, we suggest reading Afrofuturism as a strategy of queering the genres and show difficulties of flattening art practices by applying that label on various artistic and cultural backgrounds. In our interview Milumbe Haimbe clearly distanced herself from this concept by expressing that she is “by default and quite erroneously constantly referred to as an Afrofuturist”. “Other than I am a black artist making art that’s futuristic”, she continued, “I really do not see that my work has a direct relation to Afrofuturism.” Haimbe expressed, that in her opinion “Afrofuturism is more complex and nuanced than that”. If this genre isn’t just about a Black person creating futuristic art, what is it dealing with and how is it defined?

“Unlike what it suggests”, mentions university lecturer Tegan Bristow, “Afrofuturism has nothing to do with Africa, and everything to do with cyberculture in the West. Bring on Sun Ra; techno mashups of DJ Spooky and the African American in outer space.” In 1993 cultural critic Mark Dery coined the term as following: “Speculative fiction that treats African-American themes and addresses African-American concerns in the context of twentieth century technoculture” by reappropriating “images of technology and a prosthetically enhanced future”. Dery’s quote expounds the precise agenda and spatiotemporal setting of Afrofuturism, namely within the twentieth century technoculture, addressing African-American themes in the USA. Bristow adds that “[...] the notions of alien and other are particularly explored in Afrofuturism [...]” through addressing in critical and speculative ways “[...] identity, marginalization and identification”. Afrofuturism may have been “[…] influenced by the 1970’s futuristic fantasy of universalism materialized in the P-Funk performance; the latter had a larger political agenda.” Over twenty years later with more and more artists pushing the boundaries of futuristic art from a Black perspective (or through a Black lens) the diversity of its definitions grew simultaneously. Sandra Jackson and Julie E. Moody-Freeman, the authors of the book “The Black imagination”, express the following definition: Afrofuturism, also a sub-genre of science fiction, is a literary and cultural aesthetic which encompasses historical fiction, fantasy and myth, magical realism and draws upon non-Western cosmologies to interrogate and critique current conditions of Black and other people of color to examine the past and envision different futures. More specifically Afro-futurism considers issues of time, technology, culture and race, focusing on Black speculations about the future, foregrounding Black agency and creativity, explored through literature, film, art and music. This quote seems to generally sum up everything that can be linked to the movement and acknowledges that, to speak with the words of Ytasha Womack, the author of “Afrofuturism”: “Afrofuturism stretches the imagination far beyond the conventions of our time and the horizons of expectation, and kicks the box of normalcy and preconceived ideas of blackness out of the solar system.”

Nevertheless, Moody-Freeman and Jackson’s definition of “Black and other people of color” seems to be exploring foregrounding American positions by neglecting African science fiction and any other position of international Black science fiction or POC SF. Besides one article by Debbie Olson, the book’s “Black Imagination” is, like the genre of Afrofuturism, marked as American. Although being African-American in the beginning there seems to have been a shift in its exegesis within the last twenty years since there is a visible attempt to link international artists working with futuristic approaches to it.

Afrofuturism as a trend?
Those who follow the global art world with open eyes have probably noticed an accumulation of artistic concepts dealing with the idea of space and future in its widest interpretations. This trend cannot only be seen among artistic practices,[12] but also among panels, conferences and art institutions linking artists of African descent to the term of Afrofuturism in the last five years.[13] Ytasha Womack is not surprised about the emergence of Afrofuturism, as she states that the “diversity of the nation and world [are] increasingly standing in stark contrast to the diversity in futuristic works”. [14] Accompanied by a magnificent Tumblr, the exhibition The shadows took shape at the Studio Museum in Harlem opened its doors in 2014. This show identified itself as the latest major attempt to subsume African-American artists, African artists, and other international artists under the umbrella of futuristic ideas about Black cultures. The curatorial statement characterized the show as “a dynamic interdisciplinary exhibition exploring contemporary art through the lens of Afrofuturist aesthetics.” [15] But what is meant by Afrofuturist aesthetics? Were these longing for Afrofuturist aesthetics come from that even art writer Kaelen Wilson-Goldie raises the question why Afrofuturism did not shake the Arabic art world although Egyptian cosmologies (as used in the work of Sun Ra) were predestined to being reappropriated by Arab artists?[16] The search for common aesthetics or a certain visual continuity within the field of Afrofuturist art seem quite pointless as it amalgamates all genres of cultural production including literature, visual and digital arts, performances or music - to name a few. (See: Jackson and Moody-Freeman above). The term’s mutation to a mere container of artistic practices proves best by taking a quick look in the exhibition catalogue of The shadows took shape” (see the diversity of artworks in an exemplary exhibition view on the right side). So, if there is neither a singular definition of Afrofuturism nor certain aesthetics behind it, how can this loose concept be fruitful within the field of art? Although Womack discloses that ”Afrofuturism is often the umbrella for an amalgamation of narratives”, she remarks, that “at the core, it values the power of creativity and imagination to reinvigorate culture and transcend social limitations.”[17] She continues, “The imagination is a tool of resistance.”[18] And that “With the power of technology and emerging freedoms, black artists have more control over their image than ever before.”[19] By defining imagination as a “tool of resistance”, Afrofuturism can be read as both, an “artistic aesthetic and a framework for critical theory.” [20]

At this point of the essay it is important to link the idea of ‘resistance’ to our field of interest in this Wiki - the term ‘queer’ and its various relations to African and diaspora art practices. When Afrofuturism is read as a critique on a centralized White Western imagination of the future by the use of stereotypical settings and characters closely linked to imperialistic thinking, it can be interpreted as a strategy of queering mainstream cultural production. A strategy of queering, that Alexis Pauline Gumbs calls “intervention”[21] and José Esteban Muñoz names “great refusal”[22] introduces concepts of questioning existing structures and asymmetries concerning seemingly fixed categories like race, class, sexual orientation and gender within the arts and beyond. An artistic queer intervention’s impact on real life manifests itself by […] revealing the channels through which racism, sexism and homophobia are reproduced as terms of living and offers an alternative meaning of life […] for a world free from oppression.”[23] By using the word queer “[…] beyond being the name for those of us who scare the status quo with our blatant desire for each other […]”[24] but in the sense of questioning “[…] how the world is made and remade […].”[25] both, Gumbs and Muñoz, see the great potential of using this term as a tool for reshaping thought, “because art manifest[s; M.S.] itself in such a way that the political imagination can spark new ways of perceiving and acting on a reality that is itself potentially changeable.”[26] Both authors demand a more fluid concept of imagining a borderless reality through the concept of queering, that, when applied on the broad spectrum of Black futuristic art, due to the narration’s location outside our contemporary spatiotemporal setting (e.g. in the future or in space) can function as a catalyst for discussions on current political issues.[27]

Coming back to Milumbe Haimbe’s graphic novel The Revolutionist, it is necessary to mention that although her major concern is “interculturality, of which the Afro agenda is an aspect”[28] her work cannot be directly connected to Afrofuturism. It can be argued that simply labeling The Revolutionist as Afrofuturistic flattens its potential by putting it into an already crowded niche. Whereas it could simply be interpreted as a multicultural futuristic graphic novel - or lets just say - a futuristic graphic novel, if the genre of science fiction would already be more open to the representation of diversity. A recent slap in the face of intercultural science fiction was Christopher Nolan’s celebrated mainstream movie Interstellar, that, according to André Seewood, author of “Slave cinema”,[29] tells the story of saving the entire human race from extinction by only displaying two black men in marginalized roles with a strong neglect of character development.[30] Given this example, there certainly is a need to intervene with queer forms of representation within popular culture to create an inclusive image (especially concerning the idea of a common future). If queering as a strategy of refusal and questioning is transferred to Haimbe’s graphic novel, we can interpret the protagonist Ananiya with all her peculiarities as a truly intersectional character. By drawing an androgynous, black, lesbian protagonist Haimbe demonstrates that heroes don’t have to fulfill fixed stereotypes to transport the story’s plot and that queering the genres by showing a diverse society helps to address a broader audience from various cultural, sexual and gender backgrounds through its inclusive setting. The Revolutionist breaks with science fiction’s inherent racial bias[31] and decenters whiteness as well as heterosexuality by creating a diverse society that is collectively concerned with another issue - the creation of humanoid female robots. Ananiya certainly can be understood as the antithesis[32] of the male, white hero, who is generally reflected in science fiction films as well as science fiction literature or comics.[33] Further, the protagonist inverts stereotypical female lead characters of the genre who are “predominantly white, often playing the role of the damsel in distress, a love interest, and more recently a warrior, at times with a kick-ass attitude”.[34] Due to her androgyny and sexual orientation, the main character is additionally, oppositional to Western imperialistic imaginations of African women who were stereotyped as extremely womanly and unquestionably heterosexual.[35]
So, if Milumbe Haimbe is queering the genre of science fiction as well as the genre of graphic novels through establishing a counter narrative to given stereotypes parallels to the sub-genre of Afrofuturism can be drawn at least in two main points: 1. by adding “new dimensions about identity, considering intersectionality regarding race, gender, sexual orientation, otherness, humanness, across time and space” and 2. by “decentering whiteness, Eurocentrism and Western cosmologies” and simultaneously offering “new visions of what could come to be” As queering can be a tool for every artist speaking from a subaltern position (or not) to challenge fixed categories like heteronormativity, address gender inequalities from a feminist position or speak up against racial biases in popular culture there is no need to establish parallels between Milumbe Haimbe and Afrofuturism. Calling futuristic art by Black artists or futuristic art with Black protagonists - no matter where they come from, what intention they share or which art form they use - Afrofuturism is not concrete enough as African positions in the genre of science fiction haven’t reached the mainstream audience yet and are only recently displayed in group exhibitions concerning Afrofuturism. Botswana-born artist Pamela Phatsimo Sunstrum argues that African futuristic approaches should be labeled as “African futurism,” Substituting the term Afrofuturism with African futurism, according to my reading a move in the right direction of labeling but still not fully satisfying as the aim should be to see art and popular culture on a global scale without geographical restrictions. Besides everything Afrofuturism has to offer this concept would never include an African perspective, which is, with regard to the continent’s history (e.g. colonization or its victimization in Western media through images of famine, war, destruction and poverty) an important and not deniable fact. Furthermore, African science fiction can create links to African cosmologies such as Wanjiru Kihoro does in her film “Pumzi” (2010). Afrofuturist works, Black science fiction and African futurism may address similar issues, but still African futurists have not merely achieved the same agency yet and therefore, as Kihoro affirms, “have to be very clear about the messages they are putting out.” Milumbe Haimbe is probably doing a very conscious move toward the future unlabeling of artworks by saying the she will “own that label” Afrofuturism for the moment. It makes her art accessible and visible to a broader audience by letting it be labeled although she thinks that this causes a sort of othering. She is right when saying that there “has to be more representing” and when there will be more artists from the continent who create science fiction speculative fiction or other futuristic oriented genres that are known around the globe, the need to target artists from the Global South by the country they come from or the suffix ‘afro-‘ will hopefully vanish on its own. Unless this definition is used in a beneficial way to oppose White Western or Black Western futurist approaches and art practices to identify the position and perspective the artists are speaking from to underline their artistic expressions it could be abandoned in the future. Subsuming can be said, that speculative fiction, science fiction, Afrofuturism and other forms of storytelling can be described as ways of imagining a past, future or present that can be strikingly different from our current realities and can catalyze fruitful discussions about contemporary issues. Science fiction has been used as a form of social critique from its beginnings, but there have been imagined futures and cosmologies long before the creation of this genre, all over the world.

[5] Ibid.
[6] Ibid.
[12] e.g. see Kapwani Kiwanga’s Afrogalactica: A Short History of the future (2011-ongoing)
[18] Ibid.


[24] Ibid.

[25] Ibid.


[31] Not only the genre of science fiction but also popular media in general (including comics, movies, etc.) are racially biased.


[38] Here I am referring e.g. to Cristina de Middel’s photographic series „Afronauts“ (2012), [http://www.lademiddel.com/the-afronauts.html](http://www.lademiddel.com/the-afronauts.html), accessed (06.06.2015).


[44] Ibid.

[45] Ibid.