
Sample Lesson 10: Afrofuturism: Reimagining Black Futures and Science Fiction

Theme: Identity, Systems of Power

Disciplinary Area: African American Studies

Ethnic Studies Values and Principles Alignment: 4, 5

Standards Alignment:

CA HSS Analysis Skills (9–12): Chronological and Spatial Thinking 1, 2, 4; Historical Interpretation 1, 2, 4

CA CCSS for ELA/Literacy: RH.9–10.1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 9; WHST.9–10.4, 5, 7, 8, 9, 10

CA ELD Standards: ELD.PI.9–10.1, 2, 3, 5, 6, 7, 8, 11, 12

LESSON PURPOSE AND OVERVIEW:

Afrofuturism serves as a framework to better understand the growing popularity of Black science fiction and how the genre is being used to reimagine Black life. It is also a cultural aesthetic that incorporates technoculture and the supernatural while explicitly centering people of African descent. More recently, artists, musicians, filmmakers, and writers—including Octavia Butler, Janelle Monáe, Ryan Coogler, the Movement for Black Lives, Roxane Gay, Tananarive Due, and Nalo Hopkinson, to name a few—have drawn from this analytic framework and aesthetic as an inspiration for their own projects. While their work often features Black life suspended in space or utilizing imagined technologies, Afrofuturism also calls upon authors and artists to reimagine Black life beyond the status quo and to explore the infinite possibilities of the world of tomorrow. Increasingly, activists have used the framework to reimagine a world void of oppression and exploitative systems of power.

This lesson is designed to introduce students to the analytic framework and aesthetic of Afrofuturism through literature, science fiction, art, music, and theoretical texts. By engaging Afrofuturism, students will be able to better understand how authors and artists are using literature, music, film, and other modes of cultural production to describe Black experiences and theorize new possibilities. More specifically, students will be able to identify and engage social and political critiques that manifest in Afrofuturist texts. With regard to skills, students will primarily gain experience with the qualitative method of cultural analysis. Drawing on various cultural texts, students will analyze the various ways in which Afrofuturist themes manifest and articulate how they act (or do not act) as social or cultural critiques; are indicative of cultural phenomena, practices, ideologies, or trends; or are used to make an intervention and state something entirely new. With an emphasis on developing analytical skills, students will also gain more experience with conducting

research, evaluating primary and secondary source materials, and practicing close reading and expository and creative writing.

Lesson Note: While this lesson has been developed with a focus on Black experiences and futures, it should also be noted that Chicana futurism, Latinx futurism, and Desi futurism (which refers to the forward-looking or future-focused mediums that relate to South Asian culture, including literature, music, art, film, and visual and performing arts) are also budding fields and genres. Thus, this lesson can be adapted for other ethnic experiences with the inclusion of appropriate source materials.

Key Terms and Concepts: Afrofuturism, reimagine, science fiction (sci-fi), time, space, aesthetic

Lesson Objectives (Students will be able to ...):

- Identify and analyze Afrofuturism as it manifests within various forms of art and cultural production, including literature, music, comic books, and film
- Understand how systems of power and history are being reimaged through the lens of Afrofuturism
- Discern how authors and artists use literary and poetic devices and technology within Afrofuturist texts
- Develop and reflect on new strategies, policies, and systems of power that address current social, economic, and political issues

Essential Questions:

1. What is Afrofuturism?
2. What does it mean to reimagine life beyond the status quo?
3. What is the role of art and cultural production?
4. How does Afrofuturist art and cultural production serve as a critique of history, the status quo, and systems of power?

Lesson Steps/Activities:

Day 1

1. Introduce the lesson by asking students to pull out a sheet of paper and write what they believe Afrofuturism is. Give students up to five minutes to complete this quick writing exercise.
2. After everyone has had an opportunity to reflect on the prompt, have students share their responses with a partner or neighbor or two first, then with the class.

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3. Following this discussion, provide each student with an article on Afrofuturism (options are provided in the resources below). Break the students into groups of four and have each group read the text amongst themselves. Let students know that they should make annotations as they read, noting keywords, themes, quotes that stand out, and terms that they may not be familiar with.
 4. After each group has finished reading the excerpt, task them with writing a quick summary (no more than three sentences) of how the author frames Afrofuturism. Ask them to discuss how the excerpt echoes, differs from, or builds upon what they wrote in their quick writing exercise.
 5. Have the groups share some of their takeaways and summaries of the article with the entire class. Also use this time to define any terms that students may have been unfamiliar with.
 - a. Potential Terms to Define:
 - i. Subaltern—this term is primarily used to describe people socially and politically marginalized within society, those who are deemed powerless, especially within colonial territories.
 - ii. Pulp—this term has historically been used to describe early magazines that were printed on low quality paper made from wood pulp. However, the term has been used more broadly to describe works of art and literature (e.g., fiction, music, zines, etc.) that often included sensational material, short fiction works, and what was often viewed as “low-quality literature.” Pulp fiction and other works are often seen as the predecessors of superhero comic books.
 - iii. Speculative fiction—is a broad artistic genre that is defined by its inclusion of supernatural, futuristic, and dystopian elements. Speculative fiction includes the genres of science fiction, fantasy, horror, fairy tales, superhero fiction, and more.
 - iv. Appropriate/appropriation—to take elements of something for one’s own use, often without permission.
 - v. Antebellum—refers to the period in the United States prior to the Civil War.

Day 2

1. Start the second day by discussing the diversity of Afrofuturism. Coined in the 1990s, the term “Afrofuturism” describes a cultural aesthetic, philosophy of science, and philosophy of history that explores the developing intersection of African diaspora culture with technology. It is grounded in the belief of a better future for African Americans and aims to connect those from the Black diaspora with their African ancestry.

Show students that Afrofuturism can be found in artwork, literature, fashion, film, and music by providing students with a sampling of classroom and age-appropriate Afrofuturistic examples of the teacher’s choosing.

Afrofuturism is often marked visually with African iconology, for example through the use of Adinkra symbols or Ancient Egyptian artifacts (e.g., the ankh, Eye of Horus, and pyramids). Sun Ra, Earth, Wind & Fire, and George Clinton and Parliament-Funkadelic were well known for incorporating such symbolism into their music and album art. Also present in the aesthetic repertoire of Afrofuturism is a bright and diverse color palette, mysticism, extraordinary abilities and powers, and technology and technoculture. Steampunk also has found its place in the Afrofuturistic aesthetic. More contemporary artists like Missy Elliott, Beyoncé, Jay-Z, Kamasi Washington, and Janelle Monáe are known for incorporating such elements in their music videos. The Studio Museum in Harlem showcased Afrofuturistic artwork in some of their exhibits as well. The Ford Theater production of “The Wiz” fused these elements into a classic retelling of The Wizard of Oz. Additionally, writers such as W. E. B Du Bois and Octavia Butler explore Afrofuturism in their works.

Afrofuturism is intriguing because of its visual aesthetic, but its purpose is much bolder. By design, it is intended to challenge the status quo by reimagining and confronting everyday challenges that African Americans face. Topics like racism, disenfranchisement, social inequality, and the pursuit of justice often find a home in Afrofuturistic works. Characters like Luke Cage explore the alternate possibilities for African Americans men—in this case by imagining an African American man impervious to bullets. The fictional country of Wakanda in Black Panther portrays a society where Africans or African Americans are economically, technologically, and socially advanced.

Essentially, Afrofuturism is a vehicle through which artists, writers, musicians, filmmakers, fashion designers, and others express their frustrations with the current condition of African Americans in society and posit a new theory of what could be, what could have been, and what will be if these issues are addressed and resolved. While a utopian society without social injustice and racism may

seem like a dream, it is one the contributors to this genre are willing to aspire to and work toward through their own contributions in the Afrofuturistic space.

2. Engage students in a discussion around what is and is not Afrofuturism, grounded in contemporary examples that students may be familiar with.
 - a. Guide the students through features like settings, characters, and other literary devices and elements of Afrofuturism.
 - i. Option: Utilize the recent Black Panther film and comic books.
 - ii. Option: Teachers can select a podcast, text, short story, or novel.
3. Break the students into groups and ask them to brainstorm other elements that may be found in Afrofuturism.
4. Once students have had a chance to discuss some ideas, ask them to imagine an Afrofuturistic setting in which a story may take place.
 - a. Students write down their ideas on butcher paper or large sticky notes.
5. Ask student groups to share their settings with the class and explain why they chose the details that they did.

Day 3

1. As a class, revisit the texts from day 2 and begin to discuss how the texts draw on Afrofuturism. If possible, bring in copies of comic books, short stories, and zines.
2. After discussing the cultural texts for 10 to 15 minutes, let the students know that they will create their own cultural text that engages Afrofuturism or reimagines their own community's future.
3. Select a short story, a poem, or song lyrics for students to read, and guide them through a discussion of the elements of Afrofuturism.
4. Introduce the assignment by telling students that they have the option of creating a zine, comic book, short story, or poem that incorporates what they've learned about Afrofuturism, specifically drawing on the overall aesthetic and analytical framework. They will also write a one-page artist's statement describing their work and rationale. It is highly recommended that teachers create their own rubrics for this assignment and distribute them to students at the onset.
5. To start this project, have students spend the remainder of the class drafting an outline of their project and researching other Afrofuturist art that might serve as a source of inspiration. Be sure to remind students to consider how they want

to develop the project. For example, will they create a digital or hard copy zine or comic book?

6. For homework, have students complete their outlines.

Day 4

1. Start class by showcasing what art materials students will have access to (e.g., markers, construction paper, card stock, colored pencils, rulers, felt-tip pens, graphics software) in order to complete their project.
2. After students have completed their projects, dedicate a final class day for sharing and reflection. Have each student place their work on display around the classroom. Allow students to walk around and examine their peers' projects for 15 to 20 minutes.
3. After perusing the projects on display, have each student briefly present their artist's statement aloud to the entire class.
4. Students then prepare a brief reflection on their key takeaways from the lesson overall, as well as on their experience creating Afrofuturist-inspired projects and on viewing the creations of their classmates.

Assessment, Application, Action, and Reflection:

- Students will complete a written reflection on their understanding of Afrofuturism before and after the lesson.
- Students will analyze cultural texts.
- Students will actively think about how Afrofuturism is being engaged as an analytic framework for reimagining systems of power.
- Students will complete a culminating project in which they are responsible for creating a cultural text that engages Afrofuturism.

Materials and Resources:

Examples of materials that can be used in this lesson are provided below. There is a growing body of online resources and instructional materials available for teachers interested in teaching this topic. As with all materials, local educational agencies should consider content carefully for appropriateness for their classrooms.

- This American Life podcast, "We Are in the Future":
<https://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/cr/cf/ch4.asp#link95>

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- Time magazine article, “It’s Not Just *Black Panther*. Afrofuturism Is Having a Moment”: <https://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/cr/cf/ch4.asp#link96>
 - Myron T. Strong and K. Sean Chaplin. 2019. “Afrofuturism and Black Panther,” *Contexts* 18 (2): 58–59. <https://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/cr/cf/ch4.asp#link97>
 - CBS Mornings news clip and interview with author Tomi Adeyemi, “Afrofuturism gains new momentum as artists reclaim black history”: <https://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/cr/cf/ch4.asp#link98>
 - PBS It’s Lit! video, “Afrofuturism: From Books to Blockbusters”: <https://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/cr/cf/ch4.asp#link99>
 - TED-Ed video, “Why should you read sci-fi superstar Octavia E. Butler?”: <https://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/cr/cf/ch4.asp#link100>