

“The Education of Hope: Ernst Bloch and the Utopian Psychogeographies of Contemporary Afrofuturism”

Written by Sarah Churchill, PhD Candidate, Drew University | schurchill@drew.edu

“Even the silliest dreams nevertheless exist as foam; daydreams even contain a foam from which a Venus has sometimes risen.”

- Ernst Bloch (1885–1977)¹

“There are black people in the future.”

- Alisha Wormsley (b.1978)²

At the exhilarating finale of Ryan Coogler’s 2018 blockbuster *Black Panther*, the film’s hero T’Challa carries his wounded rival, Warmonger, to a precipice overlooking the mythical nation of Wakanda. As the sun sets over a dense cityscape, magnificent with slender, obelisk-like skyscrapers and chains of endless, rugged mountains, Warmonger remarks, “It’s beautiful.” T’Challa, moved by the sight of his dying cousin, hesitantly offers to heal him. He will spare his life if he agrees to atone for his vicious crimes. And yet, the sight of this gleaming utopia, a mythical, shining “golden city” hidden from the prying and plunderous eyes of the “colonizers,” is not enough. Warmonger refuses both T’Challa’s pity and his prison. As he surveys the scene a final time, he replies, “Bury me in the ocean with my ancestors that jumped from the ships, they knew death was better than bondage.”³

In a crowded landscape of bombastic superhero films, *Black Panther* is groundbreaking.⁴ The first of its kind to feature an almost entirely black cast, its arrival marked a profound moment in American cultural history. While critiqued for its unabashed capitalist appropriation of black cultural capital, Disney’s *Black Panther*, nonetheless was more than a box office smash; it was a celebration of solidarity and unapologetic blackness. As one excited fan, a Nigerian immigrant named Roye explained, “It’s a time to express the joy that you feel...to see what could have been, or what to strive for now. [It] is something that hits me on a very personal level.”⁵ The film, however, is not merely a meta-critique of the lack of diverse opportunities for black creative labor in global culture more broadly. *Black Panther* matters because it’s the first time that any

African nation has been visualized so futuristic and successful. Wakanda not only rivals every conceivable metropole in the west, it surpasses them. A city of diverse, fashionable and sophisticated tribes, Wakandans live in dignified harmony without aid or interference from the West. Quite unlike its exploited, poverty-stricken African neighbors, Wakanda is a place apart, technologically, intellectually and socially superior, thanks largely to its sequestration of the mysterious and powerful alien metal known as vibranium. (see figure 1)

As pop culture critic Evan Narcisse explains, “Wakanda represents this unbroken chain of black excellence that never got interrupted by colonialism.”⁶ For fans like Royce, the film then functions like a restoration of a lost past, an Afrofuturist, saturnalian inversion of tropes of African savagery and debasement. In Wakanda, the Africans, rather than the colonizers, are the most advanced society on Earth. This hierarchical inversion serves as an empowering catharsis, reminding audiences that historical trauma may have robbed Africa of its potential to be an equal among, or even superior to, Western civilization, but that it may yet rise again. In this example, art does not “imitate life” but prefigures it, creating a space in which the “not-yet-consciousness,” as the German theorist Ernst Bloch explained it, might come into being and subsequently produce a better world.⁷

For Bloch, art was critical to the development of utopian consciousness and the desire for a different, more equitable future. Believing the act of creation to be in and of itself an expression of hope, he argued that through art, man visualized what was lacking and pointed the way towards an attainable reality. “The stage,” he proffered, “is not just illusion; it can also be anticipation of what is to come, for in it the resistance of the empirical world is eliminated... True art, including nonrevolutionary art, is always a clarion call and a challenge.”⁸ The juxtaposition of art and the utopian imagination functions then as a critical, reflexive space wherein “anticipatory consciousness” develops, endowing its creator with a kind of transformative, future-oriented

agency. It is, in effect, “the *education* of hope” that creates the space wherein “better” is a goal made realizable.⁹

Yet, the utopia of Bloch differs markedly from the social utopias of Plato’s *Republic* (c. 375 BCE), Thomas More’s *Utopia* (1551) or William Morris’s *News from Nowhere* (1890), each of which, concerned with the *restoration* of virtue, morality or leisure, sought a *return* to a past unmarked by original sin, corruption or capitalism. Consequently, the futures they imagined, according to Bloch, were too fixed, hyper-proscriptive and dogmatic and would, ultimately, collapse of their own weight.¹⁰ Bloch, a dialectical Marxist, was concerned with locating the needs of oppressed social groups, rebelling against the domination of the middle classes and ossification of bourgeois values represented by the utopias of Plato or More.¹¹ He envisioned the world as “still unclosed” and eternally unfinished, rejecting the dogged cycle of such “self-renewing” Arcadian returns as teleological “prison-formations against the real possibility.”¹² “Even disappointed hope wanders around agonizing, a ghost that has lost its way,” Bloch explains, “It does not perish through itself, but only through *a new form* [emphasis added].”¹³

Instead, Bloch considered the utopia as progress beyond the past—not a return, but an “exodus” or escape into the realm of freedom. In utopia, Bloch argued, “a new beginning is posited, and the unlost heritage takes possession of itself; that glow deep inside...the one salvation: rises from our hearts, unbroken in spite of everything.”¹⁴ This essential distinction between Bloch’s conception of utopias and that of his predecessors is critical to understanding the utopian imagination in black visual culture. In Alex Zamelin’s *Black Utopia* (2019), Zamelin argues that black Americans, through their historic experiences of slavery, racial oppression, xenophobia, economic inequality and now environmental collapse, understand intimately the obstacles to achieving a better future. Black culture is aware of the “herculean task” of progress, he writes, “But rather than maintain fantasies of innocence, many know that dreams can become

nightmares and that life is too short and filled with too much injustice to not dream for a better one.”¹⁵

While many in the early twentieth century argued that utopias were too immature or ethically dangerous to exist, black utopia makes an opposing argument.¹⁶ Critiquing and counter-posing its intellectual history, black utopias, argues Zamelin, combine the “unseen transformative possibilities” of utopian thinking with an awareness of its limitations in ways that can “invigorate contemporary political thinking.”¹⁷ For black Americans, the utopian future imagined by Frederick Douglass (1818–1895), Sojourner Truth (1798–1883), W.E.B. Dubois (1868–1963), George Schuyler (1895–1977) and countless others remains dangerously incomplete. Liberation from racial subjugation and harassment, justice for the brutalized and the oppressed and equity for all to live safely and contentedly are, as yet, unrealized promises of American citizenship. Utopia then is a fruitful site for the black political thought to prosper, because it lives in the unlimited realm of human imagination as a space “beyond the possible,” “a laboratory for our most radical desires” and darkest human longings.¹⁸

However, the legacy of trauma wrought by the transatlantic slave trade eliminated the possibility for any return to a pre-colonial Eden in black cultural thought, particularly for those Americans whose erasure of heritage in the past has rendered them culturally homeless in the present. Tricia Rose suggests that while there is no question that all oppressed people have longed for a time when they could exercise control over their environments, “the dream...is too often part of a postcolonial white fantasy which by definition depends on the domination of another group of people for its reconstruction of that arcadian time.”¹⁹ As Lyman Tower Sargeant’s analysis illustrates, utopian colonial settlements in North and South America, New Zealand and Australia, particularly, exploited both the resources and labor of indigenous populations for their survival.²⁰ Consequently, the vast majority of black utopian spaces have,

since the mid-twentieth century, been either unreachable or existed completely outside of any tangible reality. In many instances, they aren't even located on solid ground. Rather, black contemporary artists today envision their utopias in dreamy, underwater worlds, among celestial heavens, or in a concealed and unplotable mythscape.

Black utopias today are more than an entertaining fantasy or imaginative magical realism. They are spaces wherein the safety and survival of a people are prioritized through the creative engineering of biology and place. Because black bodies are not wholly safe *anywhere*, black utopias are situated *nowhere*.²¹ The concept of the utopia as nowhere was first introduced by Thomas More, who played with Greek root of the word as either "eutopia," the place where all things are well, or "u-topia," no place. These oppositional interpretations of the concept have, of course, lead to ambiguity about More's intentions with his seminal work.²² However, there can be no doubt that for Afrofuturists, these unreachable spaces, whether under water, in outer space or disguised by technology and magic, are indeed nowhere, functioning as protected spaces wherein trauma is healed, survival is made possible and the future is envisioned. As Ruth Levitas has argued, utopias are "*always* primarily about the present," consequently, their function is "*always* primarily critical".²³ Conceptions of black utopia accordingly address the brutal ways in which structural discrimination and racial violence have threatened black lives, making visible the dangerous reality of racism and bigotry in our daily present.

While utopias and utopianism are often perceived to be a primarily Western construct theorized through primarily Western academic models, Bloch's theorizations of utopia offer us a satisfying critical lens through which to understand Afrofuturism as a utopian thought project.²⁴ The following will consider this thesis in the context of several recent examples of Afrofuturism in black visual culture, focusing particularly on the conception of the utopian psychogeography in each work. This idea of place as affective of thought, feelings and behavior was first introduced

by another Marxist theorist, Guy Debord (1931–1994) in 1955. Looking to Ellen Gallagher’s (b. 1965) mixed media *Coral Cities* (2008), Ryan Coogler’s *Black Panther* (2018), and Mikael Chukwuma Owunna’s (b. 1990) *Infinite Essence* photographs (2018), I’ll address specifically the construction of utopian psychogeographies in recent Afrofuturism as “nowhere” spaces. I argue that their articulation critiques the hazardous reality of black life in America, celebrates the resiliency of black culture in the face of those circumstances and posits an alternative to suffering in the present. Thinking through Block’s conception of art as “meaning cloaked in images,” the ultimate purpose of which is to “set free” abstract ideals and pre-figure possible alternative realities, I’ll consider these examples as transformative acts in the “education in hope” in black political thought.²⁵ I posit that hope, for black Americans is not an idle wish, but a necessity— a means towards forging a destiny regardless of the circumstances.²⁶ In this project, artists are central; their labor emphasizes the possibility of transformations in the material base upon which racial oppression operates. Their radical visualizations of alternative futures symbolize intellectual freedom in the present and hope for its resolution in future.

“Afrofuturism” is an aesthetic movement and “method of cognitive estrangement” with roots in Harlem’s politically-inspired Black Arts Movement (1965–75).²⁷ The term, coined in Mark Dery’s seminal essay “Black to the Future” (1994), developed to address the emergence of black science fiction writers and artists within a genre historically defined by white authorship. It is less an identity than a trans-media collective, consisting of artists, writers, curators and musicians across generations who share, according to Ytasha Womack, an interest in the “intersection of imagination, technology, the future, and liberation.”²⁸ Jazz pioneer Sun Ra (1914–43), writers Samuel R. Delany (b. 1942) and Octavia Butler (1947–2006) and graffiti artist Ramellzee (1960–2019), amongst many others typically exploited themes of alienation and radical technological alterity to express the experience of blackness in America. As cultural critic Greg Tate explains,

the conditions of alienation that come from being a black subject in American society parallels the kind of alienation that science fiction writers try to explore through various genre devices—transporting someone from the past to the future, thrusting someone into an alien culture, on another planet, where he has to confront alien ways of being. All of these devices reiterate the condition of being black in American culture. Black people live the estrangement that science fiction writers imagine.²⁹

For Womack, Afrofuturism is a form of black empowerment, by which technology remakes and inverts convention thinking about black identity and imagination. “Black identity,” she suggests, “does not have to be a negotiation with awful stereotypes, a dystopian view of the race...an abysmal sense of powerlessness, or a reckoning of hardened realities. Fatalism is not a synonym for blackness.”³⁰ In this way, technological reinventions of alternative black experience subvert the ways in which the “fatal invention” of race, as well as the hideous ways technology has been brought to bear upon black bodies, has historically eroded the health, happiness and safety of the global subaltern. The black utopian mythscape, I would argue, both cocoons and structures a supplemental identity through which liberation and empowerment is enacted and performed. The complete erasure of the toxic landscape of American racism and its replacement with a place of surreal beauty and safety, “wakes utopian consciousness” indicating, as Bloch has argued, “the not-yet-become in the scale of its possibilities.”³¹

In Ellen Gallagher’s *Coral Cities* series, an imaginative and illuminating underwater Atlantis unfolds beneath the ocean’s murky depths in a bold and complex assemblage of paper scrimshaw, figurative collage and delicate watercolor. The collection visualizes the mythical utopia of Drexciya, a watery world populated by the offspring of West African women forced from slave ships and subsequently drowned in the Middle Passage. *Coral Cities*, inspired by the Detroit-based techno duo of the same name, was exhibited at the Tate Liverpool and Dublin City Gallery as part of the commemoration of the 200th anniversary of the abolition of slavery in the

United Kingdom. As Hollie Kearns observed, the involvement of the Liverpool and Dublin, both significant ports of passage in the transatlantic slave trade, was hardly incidental.³²

According to Womack, the Drexciya myth functions as a reclamation of African spiritualism and mysticism, in which the supernatural is recovered as natural knowledge and heritage eradicated by colonialism and trauma.³³ The Drexciyans, whose magical survival and parthenogenesis echoes similar myths of transformation among the Dogon and Yoruba, are the conception of James Stinson and Gerald Donald in 1997. Their invented mythos, manifested in electro-techno tracks like “Bubble Metropolis” and “Beyond the Abyss,” romanticized a sense of lost heritage by imagining the resistance and survival of the formerly enslaved at the bottom of the ocean floor. As Greg Tate explains, “In reconceiving post-industrial Detroit as a marine maroon colony, Drexciya’s founding fathers joined a host of Black electronic artists who’ve converted blighted urban conclaves into places where liberatory dreamings could form.”³⁴ Drexciya imagined an alternative, inverted reality, wherein the once brutalized were now superior to their former enslavers. With humour, joy, beauty and grief Gallagher gives Drexciya a critical visual form and an inventive taxonomy through which to meditate on the genealogical mission of salvage and recovery in Drexciya’s imaginative mythos.³⁵

Watery Ecstatic (2007), a delicate ink, watercolor and paper scrimshaw, showcases Gallagher’s signature fascination with stereotypes of black female beauty. (see figures 2, 3) At the bottom of a largely white field, a row of disembodied female heads punctuates the starkness of the paper. With snaking tendrils, exaggerated lips and narrowed, piercing eyes the women assault the viewer with a shared accusatory stare, while above, exquisitely carved aquatic life tumbles peacefully in the current. On closer inspection, the slipstream is filled not with star fish, conch shells or sea anemone, but with hybrid human forms, whose elaborate hairstyles mimic the forms of those various marine specimens. The contrast between the painted and carved

figures is stark, both compositionally and formally. The figures below meet our gaze, dare us to ignore their horror, while above, the beautiful and almost imperceptible Drexciyans are thoroughly uninterested in us, absorbed in their own activities and in each other. The disjuncture suggests Drexciya signifies a space of confrontation and healing. Now safe from the exploitative reach of the slavers, the Drexciyans are emancipated, spared a fate worse than death. However, they cannot forget the circumstances of their watery rebirth. Their presence, both serene and confrontational, challenges us not to forget them either.

The technological utopia of Wakanda, by contrast, represents the unrealized promise of black liberation, Pan-African advocacy and the “Back to Africa” movement of the abolitionist Paul Cuffee (1759–1817) or the Liberian nationalist Edward W. Blyden (1832–1912).³⁶ Writer and cultural critic Carvell Wallace posited, “We have for centuries sought to either find or create a promised land where we would be untroubled by the criminal horrors of our American existence.”³⁷ Wakanda then represents a return to a longed for, imagined Africa outside of history and yet, beyond it. Consequently, Wakanda is envisioned as a thriving, technologically wondrous metropolis untouched by the degradation of colonial enslavement and exploitation. Architecturally, the city’s skyline reflects an eclectic mix of North African, expressionist and futurist influences, a riotous celebration of early twentieth-century utopian architecture and the Pan-Africanism of Marcus Garvey (1887–1940). It is aesthetically reminiscent of the mud-brick fortresses of early modern Ethiopia and the funerary architecture of ancient Egypt and Sudan, dotted with skyscrapers recalling Bruno Taut’s (1880–1938) sculptural *Alpine Architektur* or Nikolai Nikolaevich Punin’s (1888–1953) spiralling *Monument to the Third International*. (See figure 1) It is a place where the past and future, technology and nature, sit comfortably together—where space ships cruise alongside herds of grazing goats and lush, untamed landscapes.

Its remoteness is a defining feature of Wakanda's continued survival and prosperity. The African nation is hidden in plain sight, disguised as a poorer, nondescript country not worth the bother of venture capitalists nor troubled enough to attract the beneficence of Western aid groups. Coogler reportedly modelled Wakanda's rugged topography after the remote Kingdom of Lesotho, a tiny nation in the heart of the mountainous South African landmass whose remote location had spared it the worst of colonization.³⁸ Wakanda's isolation, however, sets up a critical dystopian rivalry between the film's main characters T'Challa and his estranged cousin Killmonger, who battle for competing visions of their homeland as either open and egalitarian or secluded, the preserve of those fortunate enough to be born within its borders. For Killmonger, whose alienation from Wakanda since birth structures his revenge, Wakanda is an elitist dystopia whose sequestration perpetuates global inequality. His plotline, beginning with his childhood abandonment in an American inner city and concluding with his incitement of war against T'Challa and the "colonizers," then critically dismantles the colonial leitmotif of Africa as disempowered or "less than." By following the trans-Atlantic slave trade to its logical conclusion, urban blight and systemic racism in the present-day America, the film contrasts *what is* with what is "really possible."³⁹

The use of Egyptian and Nubian architectural motifs in Wakanda functions as a reclamation of those ancient north African kingdoms from their Westernization within the art historical canon, a process which largely divorced Northeast Africa from the continent. Egyptian and Nubian kingdoms, as pre-colonial sites of cultural and political power, technical and artistic innovation and raw mystical energy, feature prominently among the work of many Afrofuturists, most prominently in the performances of the enigmatic Sun Ra. Sun Ra, for example, later emulated by funk superstar George Clinton (b. 1941), married a mythical alien abduction narrative with the romanticization of ancient Egypt as means towards a self-conscious myth

making. Womack argues this appropriation functions as the restoration and reunification of science, art and origin myth.⁴⁰ “In contrast to the Western inclination to separate bodies of knowledge into distinctive fields,” Malidoma Patrice Somé explains, “African systems are often more expansive and inclusive, bringing together philosophical, religious and scientific concepts into a more holistic approach toward comprehending reality.”⁴¹ Colonization largely erased these scientific contributions of early modern Africa, dismissing their knowledge of medicine or the cosmos as mythology in a naked attempt to preserve the Eurocentric Enlightenment narrative. Afrofuturism’s stylist adoption of Egyptian, Nubian and Dogon narratives and aesthetics, thus reclaims and reinvents these rich cosmologies.

It is little wonder then that the uninhabited and unconquered cosmos, a sacred site in Egyptian, Dogon and Nubian cosmologies, so frequently constitutes the psychogeography of Afrofuturist narratives.⁴² When T’Challa is reborn as the Black Panther, for example, he experiences astral projection into a celestial Serengeti where he communes with his ancestors, sleek black panthers who lounge and prowl beneath an expansive starry sky. In Mikael Owunna’s (b.1990) *Infinite Essence Series* (2018), black bodies float through an inky void, their forms constituting the universe itself, speckled with warm, vibrant and seemingly infinite constellations. Owunna explains that with this series he’s “set about on a quest to recast the black body as the cosmos and eternal.”⁴³ Hand painting his models’ bodies with fluorescent paints, Owunna has engineered a standard camera flash with an ultraviolet bandpass filter, photographing only the ultraviolet light in the frame. Illuminating his models “as universes,” Owunna depicts “the beauty of the soul and our deeper cosmic connections communicated through them.” His large format, aluminum metal prints combine modern scientific prowess with Afro-mythological theories of origin and traditions of West African metallurgy, connecting his models to their ancestry.⁴⁴ Owunna’s choice of photography further asserts control over black representation through a

medium historically disposed to dehumanization and stereotyping, bringing his work into dialogue with, for example, daguerreotypes of the enslaved by J.T. Zealy (1812–1893) and the Harvard naturalist Louis Agassiz (1807–1873).

In *James* (2018), an attractive, young bearded man curls protectively around himself, womb-like, eyes closed in peaceful sleep or quiet contemplation. (see figure 4) Hugging his knees to his chest, the surface of his skin glows as if lit by a vast network of interior galaxies, radiant with violet, fuchsia and orange starlight. He is mythical, god-like and otherworldly, powerful in his corporeal containment of the endless expanse of the heavens. It is a powerful and unexpected celebration of black masculinity and a pointed critique of the pervasive media portrayal of black men as either victims or victimizers in photojournalism. “Being gunned down by police officers, drowning and washing up on the shores of the Mediterranean, starving and suffering in award-winning photography,” he scolds, “The trope of the black body as a site of death is everywhere.”⁴⁵

Infinite Essence then imagines the black body as source of ethereal light and life in the universe. These are bodies untouched by scars of physical or psychological violence, made wondrous by an imagined intimacy with the heavens, enveloped in stars. The title of Owunna's project was reportedly inspired by Chinua Achebe's writing on traditional Igbo spirituality, specifically its supreme deity, Chukwu, and the concept of *chi*, a spirit guide.⁴⁶ Owunna's encapsulation of dazzling UV light, reflects larger themes of healing and holism in his work. “Regardless of our experiences of oppression on the physical plane, we are infinite,” he writes, “As infinite as the universe, and the stardust that forms every fiber of our beings.”⁴⁷ Owunna hopes that through his renewal of myth and glorification of blackness, black people will see and feel themselves affirmed and transformed.

Bloch has suggested that myths and fairytales are empowering, functioning as “wish instruments of the most comforting kind” wherein the “dreams of a better life” become “a command” to see the wish resolved in action.⁴⁸ The fairy tale for Bloch was, in fact, the original utopia, filled with “the utopia of better life and justice.”⁴⁹ In each of the above examples, I have explored three critical psychogeographies of Afrofuturism: an underwater Atlantis known as Drexciya, the mythical nation of Wakanda and the deep, infinite space of the cosmos. Whether underwater or high above the ground, the success and survival of black culture in these imagined psychogeographies is intimately constructed and protected by its isolation from the real world. Bloch’s conception of the fairy tale suggests that such imaginative wish spaces are critical to the success of the utopian dream image. Like the delighted yearnings of children for magic castles in the clouds, human beings long for the fantastic as a means towards illuminating that which is most wished for. He elucidates,

the cloud is not only castle or ice mountain to the fairytale gaze, but is also an island in the sea of heaven or a ship, and the blue skies on which it sails reflect the ocean. If faraway realms are over our heads, if the air of heaven with its clouds is not limited by the earthly coasts...then all fairytales submerge this in a gigantic water above in which the blue heavens emerge, and the journey continues without difficulty towards the coast.⁵⁰

Wish fulfillment is a crucial human activity for Bloch because he conceives of the future of the material world as still fully malleable. Consequently, utopia, as Levitas proposes, “reaches towards that future and anticipates it”.⁵¹ In so doing, the human longing for “better castles in the sky,” for transformative spaces which support psychological development, stimulating feelings of safety, wholeness and empowerment, guides how we select which futures we wish to pursue. Yet, the function of utopias for Bloch is not merely the act of wishful thinking as catharsis alone. The purpose of daydreaming, rather, is as a critical methodology that is “anticipatory rather than compensatory.”⁵² The difference between the compensatory “abstract utopia,” wherein the

world remains the same and only the dreamer himself has changed, and the anticipatory “concrete utopia,” encompassing the dreamer’s eventual action towards a different future, exemplifies the difference between desire and hope.⁵³ Utopia is the expression of hope, but hope is understood as “a directing act of a cognitive kind.”⁵⁴

Afrofuturists, of course, do not desire to be physically reborn as powerful mermaids, superheroes or ethereal Igbo gods. These conceptions, rather, function as a meta-critique of the world as it is. The so-called “pleasure activism” of curator, artist and prominent Detroit Afrofuturist Ingrid LeFleur illustrates the ways in which “not-yet-consciousness” of the utopian impulse in Afrofuturism transforms political thought and action. LaFleur’s activism is centrally engaged with the equitable distribution of resources, particularly in the face of a growing climate crisis threatening to disproportionately target already stressed communities of color. Using Drexciya as a metaphor, she advocates for revolutionary changes in household water distribution in Detroit, the cost of which is twice the national average, threatening access to the 40% of residents living at or below the poverty line.⁵⁵ In 2019, more than 12,000 accounts were shut off by the city’s water department due to non-payment, with some families living without water for two years or more, a severe and potentially deadly humanitarian crisis.⁵⁶ Six years in to the crisis, the city continues to struggle with the resolution of water accounts in non-payment. LaFleur argues that the only solution is to make water, a naturally occurring resource, free for Detroit residents. Using Drexciya as foundational myth she notes, “The waters hold sacred knowledge and memory and these histories and bodies and our ancestors.”⁵⁷ For LaFleur, it is absurd to invoice for such a necessity, particularly from those who can least afford it.

Thinking globally, racial justice according to LeFleur, will only follow from the decolonization of the mind. She argues, “With the way we treat each other as humans, how can we ever treat the environment with any sort of respect?”⁵⁸ In this, Afrofuturism is a means

towards understanding the black experience outside of the denigrative structural forces of colonization and slavery. Drawing from post-colonial theorists like Frantz Fanon (1925–1961), Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (b. 1938) and Edward Said (1935–2003), LaFleur suggests that radical love, ancestral grounding, experimentation and resiliency, central tenets in her Afrofuturist philosophy, stimulate physical transformation and facilitate measurable outcomes.⁵⁹ As speculative modalities, Afrofuturist narratives, such as those explored herein, reflect not just the desire for a different world, but the *hope* for a safer, more equitable one in the immediate future.

In our present moment, America is experiencing threats to its democracy likely to disproportionately target many marginalized and disenfranchised communities, particularly those of color. The resurgence of white nationalism and misogyny, the looming fear of climate change and the naked existence of super-structural racism at the highest levels of American governance all threaten hope for a better tomorrow. A failure of hope, particularly for black Americans, would be deadly serious, resulting in increased levels of apathy and violence and decreased participation in our political and social systems. Afrofuturist utopias, as object lessons in hope executed through visual and material culture, safeguard the existence of hope in the world, expanding the horizon of what is possible by casting the gaze heavenward to spaces of infinite possibility. Seeing oneself as superhuman, constituted by a dreamscape outside or beyond the “iron will” of a tragic history, gives the marginalized, particularly, a will to hope and an incentive to gather collectively and “express the joy that you feel...to see what could have been, or what to strive for now.”

Semiotician and science-fiction author Samuel R. Delany has argued, “We need images of tomorrow, and our people need them more than most.”⁶⁰ Following from the systematic erasure of their past and the destruction of African social consciousness, black culture has, throughout the twentieth century, largely struggled to envision a better, more exciting future.⁶¹ However, the

emergence of the Black Lives Matter movement, a global collective of liberators concerned with the affirmation of black humanity, and the spread of intersectional climate activism, suggest that though hope might be “disappointed” with current circumstance, it’s tough to kill.⁶² The utopian imagination then is uniquely suited to address the growing threat to hope in the black community by restoring history and heritage, positing a radically alternative future in place of the dystopian present. “There are black people in the future,” is less a statement of hope than a proclamation of the concrete utopianism in the present.⁶³

FIGURES



Figure 1: Film still, Wakanda from Ryan Coogler's *Black Panther* (USA: Marvel Studios and Walt Disney Pictures, 2018)

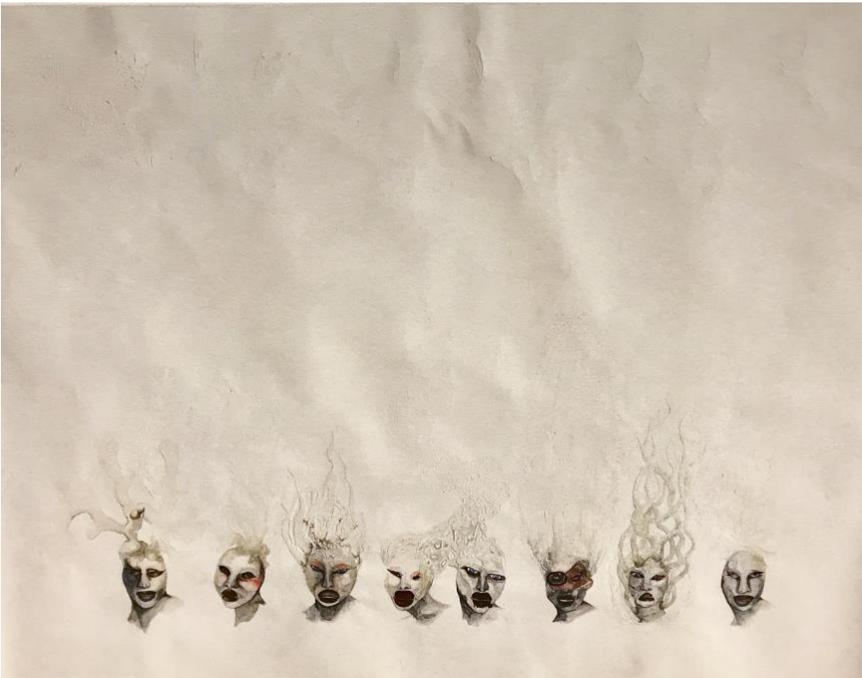


Figure 2: Ellen Gallagher, *Watery Ecstatic* (2007), Ink, watercolor, crushed mica and cut paper on paper, 55 1/8 x 74 13/16", *Coral Cities* (2007–08)

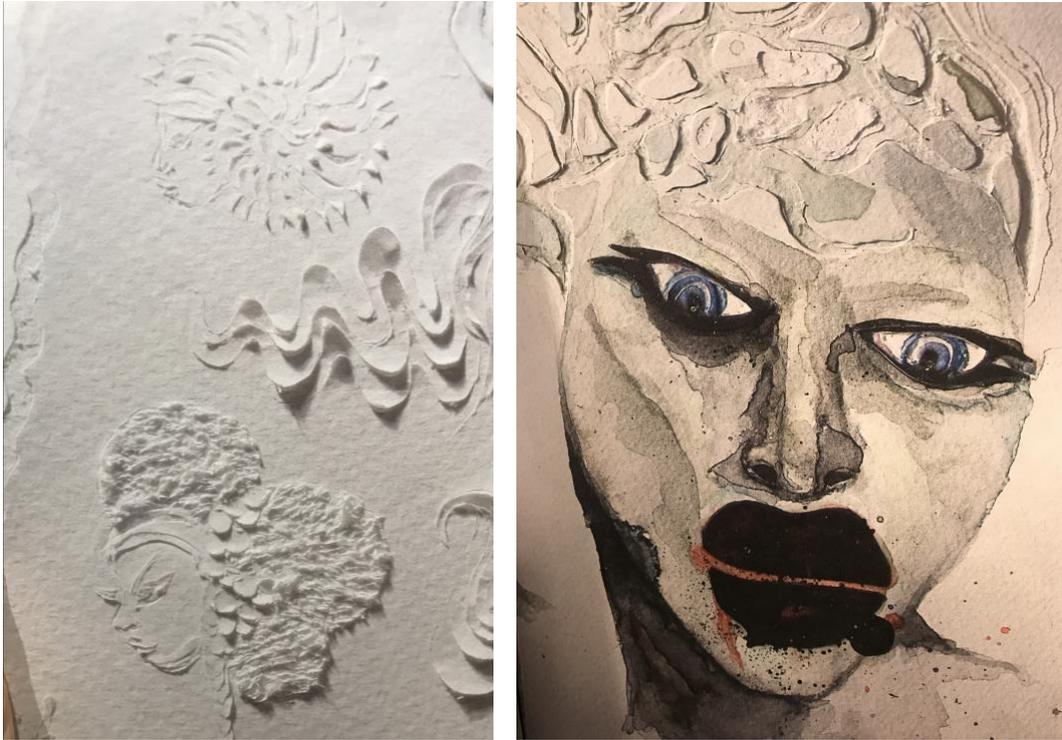


Figure 3: detail of scrimshaw (left) and painted Drexciyans (right), *Watery Ecstatic* (2007)



Figure 4: Mikael Owunna (b. 1990), *James* from the *Infinite Essence series* (2018), Aluminum metal print, 40 x 60 x 2"

¹ Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope: Volume 1*, Trans. Neville Plaice, Stephen Plaice and Paul Knight (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1952/1995), p. 195.

² Alisha Wormley, *There are Black People in the Future, Manifest Destiny*, Billboard Installation at Queen's Bar, Detroit, curated by Ingrid LaFleur, July 2019.

³ Ryan Coogler. *Black Panther* (USA: Marvel Studios and Walt Disney Pictures, 2018), film.

⁴ See for example, Ishaan Tharoor, "Why Wakanda Matters," *The Washington Post*, February 20, 2018,

[https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2018/02/20/why-wakanda-](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2018/02/20/why-wakanda-matters/)

[matters/](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2018/02/20/why-wakanda-matters/) and Carvell Wallace, "Why 'Black Panther' is a Defining Moment for Black America," *New York Times*, February 12, 2018,

<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/12/magazine/why-black-panther-is-a-defining-moment-for-black-america.html>.

⁵ Tharoor, "Why Wakanda Matters"

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Bloch, *The Principle of Hope: Volume 1*

⁸ Ernst Bloch, *The Utopian Function of Art and Literature: Selected Essays*, trans. Jack Zipes and Frank Mecklenburg (Cambridge and London: MIT Press, 1988), p. xxvi.

⁹ Ruth Levitas, "The Imaginary Reconstitution of Society or Why Sociologists and Others Should Take Utopia More Seriously," Inaugural Lecture, University of Bristol, October. 24, 2005, p. 8.

¹⁰ Bloch, *The Principle of Hope: Volume 1*, 205.

¹¹ Bloch, *The Utopian Function of Art and Literature: Selected Essays*, xi–xii.

¹² Bloch, *The Principle of Hope: Volume 1*, 196, 203–204.

¹³ Bloch, *ibid*, 196

¹⁴ Ernst Bloch, *The Spirit of Utopia*, Trans. Anthony A. Nassar (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), p. 3.

¹⁵ Zamelin, Alex. *Black Utopia* (New York: Columbia Press, 2019),

<https://www.hoopladigital.com/title/12429397>, p. 10.

¹⁶ Zamelin, 8.

¹⁷ *ibid*.

¹⁸ *ibid*. 10.

¹⁹ Mark Dery. "Black to the Future: Interviews with Samuel R. Delany, Greg Tate and, Tricia Rose," *Flame Wars: The Discourse of Cyberculture*, Mark Dery, ed. (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1994), p. 216; see also Lyman Tower Sargeant, "Colonial and Postcolonial Utopias," *The Cambridge Companion to Utopian Literature*, Gregory Claeys, ed. (New York, Melbourne, Madrid, et.al.: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 200–222.

²⁰ Tower Sargeant, 200.

²¹ Thomas More, *Thomas More: Utopia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, [1551] 2002).

²² J.C. Davis, "Thomas More's Utopia: Sources, Legacy and Interpretation," *The Cambridge Companion to Utopian Literature*, 29

²³ Ruth Levitas, "The Imaginary Reconstitution of Society or Why Sociologists and Others Should Take Utopia More Seriously," Inaugural Lecture, University of Bristol, October. 24, 2005, p. 14

-
- ²⁴ Jacqueline Dutton, “Non-western Utopian Traditions,” *The Cambridge Companion to Utopian Literature*, 223.
- ²⁵ Bloch, *The Principle of Hope: Volume 1*, 214–16.
- ²⁶ Espy, Jasmine. “Ingrid LaFleur’s Afrofuturist ‘Manifest Destiny’ Makes it Clear the Future is Black,” *Detroit Metro Times* (July 17, 2019), <https://www.metrotimes.com/detroit/afrofuturist-ingrid-lafleur-makes-it-clear-the-future-is-black-with-manifest-destiny-exhibition/Content?oid=22155857>, accessed December 4, 2019.
- ²⁷ Ytasha Womack, *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture*. (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2013). Accessed November 9, 2019. ProQuest Ebook Central, p. 138.
- ²⁸ Ibid, 9.
- ²⁹ Dery. 212.
- ³⁰ Womack, 10–11.
- ³¹ Bloch, *The Utopian Function of Art and Literature: Selected Essays*, xxxiv.
- ³² Hollie Kearns, “Review: *Coral Cities*,” *Circa Art Magazine* (<http://www.recirca.com/reviews/2007/texts/eg.shtml>) accessed December, 2008.
- ³³ Womack, 79–80.
- ³⁴ Greg Tate, “Are you Free or Are You a Mystery?,” *Coral Cities* Exhibition Catalog, (London: Tate Publishing, 2007), p. 19.
- ³⁵ Karen Alexander, “A Challenge to History: Ellen Gallagher’s *Coral Cities*,” *Coral Cities* Exhibition Catalog, 76.
- ³⁶ Tharoor, “Why Wakanda Matters”
- ³⁷ Wallace, “Why ‘Black Panther’ is a Defining Moment for Black America”
- ³⁸ Ibid.
- ³⁹ Bloch, *The Principle of Hope: Volume 1*, 196.
- ⁴⁰ Womack, 84.
- ⁴¹ Womack, 90.
- ⁴² The concept of utopian space colonies is addressed briefly in Lyman Tower Sargeant’s “Colonial and Postcolonial Utopias,” in Gregory Claeys’s *The Cambridge Companion to Utopian Literature*, however, his analysis is shockingly absent any discussion of how writers of color, like Octavia Butler, deployed tropes of space conquest in their works, not as a space of conquest, but one of refuge for the persecuted and marginalized.
- ⁴³ Mikael Owunna, *Infinite Essence Series*, <https://www.mikaelowunna.com/infinite-essence#9>, accessed December 7, 2019.
- ⁴⁴ Becky Harlan, “Every Black Person Deserves To See Themselves This Way,” *The Picture Show: Photo Stories from NPR*, <https://www.npr.org/sections/pictureshow/2019/03/03/696969592/transforming-the-pain-of-black-lives-lost-into-portraits-of-magic-embodied>, accessed December 7, 2019.
- ⁴⁵ Owunna, *Infinite Essence Series*.
- ⁴⁶ Harlan, “Every Black Person Deserves To See Themselves This Way”.
- ⁴⁷ ibid.
- ⁴⁸ Bloch, “Better Castles in the Sky,” *The Utopian Function of Art and Literature: Selected Essays*, 170–171.
- ⁴⁹ ibid, 5.
- ⁵⁰ ibid, 175–76.

-
- ⁵¹ Ruth Levitas, “Ernst Bloch on Abstract and Concrete Utopia,” *Utopian Studies*, Vol.1:2 (Penn State University Press: 1990), p. 14.
- ⁵² *ibid.*
- ⁵³ *ibid.*, 15.
- ⁵⁴ Bloch, *The Principle of Hope: Volume 1*, 12.
- ⁵⁵ LeFleur, Ingrid. “From the Drexciya to Mars: An Interplanetary Water Mission,” Lecture: John Hope Franklin Humanities Instituted at Duke University, November 27, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z5PIVt6mCFg>, accessed, December 4, 2019.
- ⁵⁶ Doug Tribou, “Kaffer: Detroit Water Shutoffs are a ‘Humanitarian Crisis,’” *Morning Edition*, NPR, August, 22, 2019, <https://www.michiganradio.org/post/kaffer-detroit-water-shutoffs-are-humanitarian-crisis>, accessed December 9, 2019.
- ⁵⁷ LeFleur, “From the Drexciya to Mars: An Interplanetary Water Mission” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z5PIVt6mCFg>, accessed, December 4, 2019.
- ⁵⁸ *ibid.*
- ⁵⁹ *ibid.*
- ⁶⁰ Dery, 190.
- ⁶¹ *ibid.*
- ⁶² Bloch *The Utopian Function of Art and Literature: Selected Essays*, 16.
- ⁶³ Wormley, *There are Black People in the Future*.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Primary Resources

Coogler, Ryan. *Black Panther* (USA: Marvel Studios and Walt Disney Pictures, 2018), film.

Owunna, Mikael Chukwuma. *Infinite Essence Series* (2018), Aluminum metal prints, as seen in the exhibition *Utopian Imagination*, Jaishri Abichandani, curator, Ford Foundation Gallery, New York City, September 17–December 7, 2019, <https://www.fordfoundation.org/about/the-ford-foundation-center-for-social-justice/ford-foundation-gallery/exhibitions/utopian-imagination/>.

Gallagher, Ellen. *Coral Cities*, The Tate Gallery: Liverpool, April 21–August 27, 2007 and Dublin City Gallery, The Hugh Lane: Dublin, September 28, 2007–January 20, 2008.

Secondary Resources

Bloch, Ernst. *The Principle of Hope: Volume 1*, Trans. Neville Plaice, Stephen Plaice and Paul Knight (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1952/1995)

— —. *The Utopian Function of Art and Literature: Selected Essays*, trans. Jack Zipes and Frank Mecklenburg (Cambridge and London: MIT Press, 1988)

— —. *The Spirit of Utopia*, Trans. Anthony A. Nassar (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000).

Claeys, Gregory, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Utopian Literature*, (New York, Melbourne, Madrid, et.al.: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

Dery, Mark. "Black to the Future: Interviews with Samuel R. Delany, Greg Tate and, Tricia Rose," *Flame Wars: The Discourse of Cyberculture*, Mark Dery, ed. (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1994), pp. 180–221.

Espy, Jasmine. "Ingrid LaFleur's Afrofuturist 'Manifest Destiny' Makes it Clear the Future is Black," *Detroit Metro Times* (July 17, 2019), <https://www.metrotimes.com/detroit/afrofuturist-ingrid-lafleur-makes-it-clear-the-future-is-black-with-manifest-destiny-exhibition/Content?oid=22155857>, accessed December 4, 2019.

Gallagher, Ellen. *Coral Cities Exhibition Catalogue* (London: Tate Publishing, 2007).

Harlan, Becky. "Every Black Person Deserves To See Themselves This Way," *The Picture Show: Photo Stories from NPR*, <https://www.npr.org/sections/pictureshow/2019/03/03/696969592/transforming-the-pain-of-black-lives-lost-into-portraits-of-magic-embodied>, accessed December 7, 2019.

Kearns, Hollie. "Review: *Coral Cities*," *Circa Art Magazine* (<http://www.recirca.com/reviews/2007/texts/eg.shtml>) accessed December, 2008

LeFleur, Ingrid. "From the Drexciya to Mars: An Interplanetary Water Mission," Lecture: John Hope Franklin Humanities Instituted at Duke University, November 27, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z5PIVt6mCFg>, accessed, December 4, 2019.

Levitas, Ruth. "Ernst Bloch on Abstract and Concrete Utopia," *Utopian Studies*, Vol.1:2 (Penn State University Press: 1990), pp. 13–26.

— —. "The Imaginary Reconstitution of Society or Why Sociologists and Others Should Take Utopia More Seriously," Inaugural Lecture, University of Bristol, October. 24, 2005.

More, Thomas. *Thomas More: Utopia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, [1551] 2002).

Suzuki, Sarah. "Kingelez Visionnaire," Post: Notes on Modern & Contemporary Art Around the Globe, September 12, 2018, https://post.at.moma.org/content_items/1176-kingelez-visionnaire?_ga=2.96893599.1014063201.1575483655-1175169203.1572009805, accessed December 4, 2019.

Tharoor, Ishaan. "Why Wakanda Matters," *The Washington Post*, February 20, 2018, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2018/02/20/why-wakanda-matters/>, accessed December 4, 2019

Tribou, Doug. "Kaffer: Detroit Water Shutoffs are a 'Humanitarian Crisis,'" *Morning Edition*, NPR, August, 22, 2019, <https://www.michiganradio.org/post/kaffer-detroit-water-shutoffs-are-humanitarian-crisis>, accessed December 9, 2019.

Wallace, Carvell. "Why 'Black Panther' is a Defining Moment for Black America," *New York Times*, February 12, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/12/magazine/why-black-panther-is-a-defining-moment-for-black-america.html> accessed December 6, 2019.

Womack, Ytasha. *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture*. (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2013). Accessed November 9, 2019. ProQuest Ebook Central.

Zamelin, Alex. *Black Utopia* (New York: Columbia Press, 2019), <https://www.hoopladigital.com/title/12429397>.