In this paper, I discuss the Art and Afrofuturism art experience, which asked a group of white participants to grapple with the complicated, exclusionary power systems that scaffold how we see and describe the future through discussion, visual analysis of a contemporary work of art and a collage artmaking project.

Abstract: This paper describes an art and Afrofuturism art experience that took place during the summer of 2020. Led by an art museum educator, the virtual experience was held over Zoom with a group of ten white adults. The art experience focused on alternative narratives and introduced participants to Afrofuturism as contemporary artistic practice and pedagogical approach. A critical multiculturalism theoretical framework informed the experience, and participants analyzed Afrofuturist art and representations in mass media to interrogate the ways that whiteness influences conceptions of the future in western culture and their own lives. Participants built on what they learned to create collages where they imagined more equitable futures developed from the Afrofuturist themes discussed in the experience.

Who Belongs in the Future: Afrofuturism, Art Education, and Alternative Narratives

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I loved putting my mind in a place of envisioning a positive future without the limits of practicality or likeliness or the challenges of existing structures. And I loved seeing different examples of how Black artists have visualized this.

— Beatrice Mora, Art and Afrofuturism participant

The future seems unrelentingly visible in contemporary discourse. It snaked through the social and political unrest in the United States during the summer of 2020, as massive numbers of protestors took to the streets demanding a different future and an end to racial violence. It shapes scientific dialogue into warning as humans careen towards a hotter, more unstable future in the face of climate change, and it lingers over our everyday during a pandemic, especially in a country seemingly dead-set on making choices that portend evolving economic and social disasters in a not-so-distant future. The future is made and unmade in the present, and what that future looks like depends on who is telling the story. Artists have always depicted the future with imagination, hope, and maybe even a little trepidation.

Critical multiculturalism asks art educators to reconsider the media, language, and aesthetics that we present to students in a way that critiques and invests in alternative ways of knowing and understanding (Acuff, 2015; Knight, 2006). The theory asks us to confront how our work impacts the future. Afrofuturism is a conceptual and pedagogical approach for applying a critical multicultural theoretical framework. As Acuff (2020) explains, “Afrofuturism is about the utopian formulation of a possible model of something that does not yet exist. Re-envisioning semantics in our future art curriculum is key to transgressing repressive social norms and power systems” (p. 20). Having researched Afrofuturism in discussion with artist Wangechi Mutu’s collages for my art history master’s thesis, I was inspired by Acuff’s adaptation of Afrofuturism as a pedagogy, and I approached this lesson as a way to re-envision my curriculum and teaching practices with Afrofuturism, through the theoretical lens of critical multiculturalism.

When I completed this project, I managed the school and teacher programs at the Georgia Museum of Art, the state museum of Georgia and the University of Georgia campus museum.

I am a white, female museum educator and doctoral student who works primarily with Black and Brown K-12 students. My interest in critical multiculturalism and museum education initially came from my desire to create relevant, critical school programming within the museum. Acuff and Evans (2014) describe critical multiculturalism in art museums as creating “counter-discursive spaces” that destabilize the institutional to break apart ossified and entrenched dominant ideologies and systems of power (p. xxviii). I am always looking for ways to problematize the white, western metanarratives portrayed in art museum galleries, putting critical multiculturalism theory to work in the art museum.

Because this Art and Afrofuturism project was completed during the summer of 2020, I had limited access to participants, and I worked with a group of adult, white, female learners. These participants reflect the identities of art museum repeat-visitors, volunteer docents and most museum educators in the United States, and I wanted to know how critical multiculturalism theory might inform programming for this audience. I wondered if it might be possible to teach about contemporary Afrofuturist art—not just to teach about Afrofuturism—but to use its themes and works of art to challenge whiteness, what Spillane (2015) describes as “white power, knowledge and privilege” (p. 57) and prioritize alternative ways of knowing. How could I teach a lesson that used art and visual culture to get white participants to interrogate their own beliefs and develop answers to challenging questions like: How does race impact how we understand our pasts and the future? How do Black contemporary artists use art to address current and historical social inequity.
through the lens of Afrofuturism? Why is it important for Black artists to imagine an Afrofuture? How can we use Afrofuturism to analyze current events? What does an equitable speculative future look like for each of us?

In this paper, I discuss the Art and Afrofuturism art experience, or lesson, which asked a group of white participants to grapple with the complicated, exclusionary power systems that scaffold how we see and describe the future through discussion, visual analysis of a contemporary work of art and a collage artmaking project. The program was an organized group who were interested in participating in the experience. Based in Afrofuturism, the art experience discussed the central topics of race, utopia, liberation, and justice with a group of ten white adults. The art experience explored ways in which personal conceptions of the past and future and cultural narratives are coded as white by looking at the way participants had the privilege of framing those ideas without race. Each element of the lesson unpacked and emphasized the need for Black artists to imagine alternative spaces. Building a critical multicultural understanding of these issues, the group examined the ways that Afrofuturist art imagines a different future while drawing attention to the social inequity of the present and the past. As expressed in the beginning quote from a participant reflection, the artmaking project made space for learners to use artmaking to articulate their own equitable, utopian futures based in alternative ways of knowing. It also inspired surprising discussions and realizations from all the participants—including me as the facilitator.

**Theoretical Framework**

Critical multiculturalism grounded all aspects of the art experience. Critical multiculturalism is an educational theory that finds its roots in Critical Race Theory. A critical multiculturalism framework destabilizes systemic inequity and dominant power structures (Acuff, 2013). The need for critical multiculturalism arose from the term “multiculturalism” morphing from a transformative pedagogy to an overused and desaturated buzzword. bell hook’s *Teaching to Transgress* (1994) describes multiculturalism as the global acceptance of decentering the west which compels educators to focus on the issue of voice: “Who speaks? Who listens? And why?” (p. 40). Multicultural education theory was created to provide all students, regardless of race, gender or class, an equal opportunity to learn. Over time, “multiculturalism” mutated into a word used for political correctness. The multicultural education framework has been misappropriated, and its powerful ideas desaturated into a mainstream framework that doesn’t threaten “the way things are” and that continues a deracialized discourse, perpetuating the inequalities the theory was created to address. In art education, over time multiculturalism came to signal a benevolent inclusivity that does not critique, or even address, power systems but instead perpetuates harmful, negligent narratives through an embrace of neutrality and an emphasis on cultural tolerance that include the dangers of reinforcing stereotypes and cultural appropriation.

The alternative framework of critical multiculturalism re-centers the complex work of analyzing oppression, institutionalized power structures and the subjugation of non-dominant cultural knowledge and voices (Acuff, 2013; 2015). The theory specifically identifies race as the locus for these intersecting power dynamics and seeks to pull apart hegemonic narratives and combat subjugation. Critical multiculturalism eschews universalized narratives and embraces personal narrative to position cultural difference within these larger systemic contexts. Its activist origins ask educators to center a wider array of voices and critique the unequal systems that have silenced and erased those perspectives. Critical multiculturalism directs educators to ask different questions including: Is this true? Who says so? Who benefits most when people believe it is true? How are we taught to accept that it is true? What are different ways of looking at the problem? (Acuff, 2018). I situated the Art and
Afrofuturism art experience within these guiding questions.

Through discussion, art analysis, and artmaking, the lesson inhabited a (virtual) critically multicultural space of constructive confrontation and critical interrogation (hooks, 1994). The lesson challenged and subverted the group’s preconceived cultural assumptions about ideas of the past and the future in a way that critiques power (Acuff, 2015). It helped learners identify for themselves the ways that hegemonic and White supremacist knowledge dominates their understandings of the future. Critical multiculturalism further informed the experience in the artmaking project. A collage activity focused on personal narrative and experience, then invited learners to visualize and articulate their own version of a disrupted future that exists outside the dominant power structures.

Afrofuturism, a term created by cultural critic Mark Dery (1994) in “Black to the Future,” provided the central pedagogical tool for the experience. Afrofuturism imagines a future where Black people are transformed from the racial, social, and economic violence of the past and present to live in futures that value Black existence and African diasporic culture (Acuff, 2020). It is a critically multicultural pedagogy that “disrupt(s) universalized knowledge and counter(s) normalized narratives” (Acuff, 2015, p. 33). By reimagining technology, identity, and liberation, Afrofuturism posits a future where “Black identity does not have to be negotiated with awful stereotypes, a dystopian view of the race, and abysmal sense of powerlessness, or a reckoning of hardened realities;” it instead declares that “fatalism is not a synonym for blackness” (Womack, 2013, p. 9). Afrofuturism reframes dominant discussions about the future and contemporary art to encompass a lived experience beyond existing structures. By adopting this lens, the Art and Afrofuturism lesson asked participants to learn and to think about a future outside traditional narratives.

Acuff (2020) explains that “Afrofuturism requires art teachers to rethink the media that they cover in their art curriculum. A future art curriculum cannot be led by Western ideals” (p. 19). This maxim dictated how I chose components for the art experience. Content in each section incorporated and prioritized Black voices. Multimedia clips from the movie “Malcolm X” and an interview with former First Lady Michelle Obama encouraged participants to draw their insights and distinctions directly from lived experiences described by Black people. The work of art we discussed, Ellen Gallagher’s Abu Simbel (Figure 3), itself exemplifies a rethinking of Western ideals. Gallagher, a contemporary Black American female artist, completed the work by performing an artistic intervention on a photogravure of Abu Simbel that she found at the Freud Museum in London (Harvard Museums, n.d.). She manipulated a Western representation of an ancient African location, reinterpreting it with racial, historical, and futurist iconography.

Figure 1: Abu Simbel, by Ellen Gallagher. Harvard Art Museums/Fogg Museum, Margaret Fisher Fund.

In addition, Afrofuturist pedagogical elements encouraged students to “develop their futures through art curriculum” (Acuff, 2020, p. 15). The art

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1 All images of Abu Simbel in this article from Harvard Art Museums/Fogg Museum, Margaret Fisher Fund, which grants permission for scholarly use.
experience encouraged this by creating space for revision and adaptation in participants’ collage making as they continued to engage with Afrofuturist theory and aesthetics. With the art project, any inclination to create work that engaged with stereotypically “African” imagery or motifs was discouraged, and participants were reminded they were not creating Afrofuturist works of art. Instead, participants were invited to make art that adopted the Afrofuturist language of possibility, liberation, and justice to represent a future that rejects cultural subjugation, White supremacy, and heteropatriarchy in our society.

Project Description

The Art and Afrofuturism art experience was developed based on my experience as a museum educator. It emphasized close looking at a single work of art and encouraged personal and collective meaning-making through a dialogic style of learning. The lesson took two and a half hours and engaged a White audience of mostly women in their 20s and 30s. This community of college-educated adult learners benefits from social and cultural privilege. The group had various levels of visual literacy—with some being experienced in discussing art in a group or class and others being unfamiliar with the practice. Despite this, all the participants are regular to semi-regular museum visitors. In relation to the concepts the lesson would introduce, most of the group felt comfortable with social justice terms and ideas. Some participants had heard of Afrofuturism, and a few were completely new to the idea.

After we watched these clips, I asked participants to draw a distinction between our discussion of our pasts and the life experiences described in the video. I worked to get the group to tease out the differences between their white understanding of the future and the explicitly raced descriptions of the future dictated to Black people in the Malcolm X and Michelle Obama interview clips. This got the group to consider how “knowledge of the dominant power is normalized, and consequently universalized” (Acuff, 2013, p. 220). This discussion primed the group to begin exploring alternative cultural knowledge in the clip from the film Black Panther.

Next, we watched and discussed aesthetic and conceptual choices in a scene from Black Panther—
an Afrofuturist film (Ryzik, 2018; Staff, 2018). The film reimagines traditional African architecture and clothing in a way that projects African cultural heritage powerfully into the future. During this discussion, participants compiled a series of observations about how Black Panther imagined an imaginary present in a different way from the prior videos and their own initial descriptions. Participants noted that the film suggested an independent future of imaginary spaces that weren’t necessarily new but that did challenge established racial, societal, and natural hierarchies: only Black characters were present, each character greeted each other with respect despite class, the ruler was female, and despite clear technological advancement in the visualization of Wakanda, it seemed to prioritize and respect the natural world.

This analysis of mass media transitioned into a close-looking discussion of Ellen Gallagher’s Abu Simbel. I introduced the work using the inquiry-based teaching method Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS) (Housen, Yenawine, & Brookshire, 2018). This learner-directed teaching strategy invites participants to make observations and connections for themselves instead of adopting the “banking style of education” (Freire, 1970). The participants developed a complex understanding of the work by finding answers to a series of three open-ended, repeating questions. The group considered what they had learned about Afrofuturism as they made observations about the work, and they didn’t ask for context or additional information because they were deeply invested in figuring out what was going on together. One overarching analysis developed by the end of the VTS exercise: participants noted parallels between alien abduction and the slave trade, and they surmised that the work of art was reimagining the existence of Black people in America as a result of slavery.

To introduce more context into the discussion, I centered the conversation with a description from Gallagher, who explains her work as “a tricked-out, multi-directional flow from Freud to ancient Egypt to Sun Ra to George Clinton” (Harvard Museums, n.d.). At this point I departed from a strict version of VTS and provided background information on visual elements of the work that they had repeatedly wondered about and played a trailer for Space is the Place, a blaxploitation film that inspired much of the work. By layering information into our discussion after participants had already analyzed the work themselves, I was able to emphasize an element of Afrofuturism that our discussion had previously overlooked—that the idea builds from visual and conceptual representations of the past. It is not just a reimagining of the past or just a utopian look forward. Almost everyone who participated noted that element as something new they learned about Afrofuturism.

After finishing up our analysis, I asked participants to begin working on a collage that pulled themes from our discussion of Afrofuturism into their works of art. I reiterated that we were not making Afrofuturist artwork. Instead, we were centering alternative narratives and representational strategies as a group of White artmakers. The collage activity encouraged learners to work like artists as they developed their renderings of an equitable speculative future. I then paused our collaging to start a discussion on the recent uprisings and protests including Black Lives Matter and the Defund the Police movements, connecting our exploration of art and artmaking to immediately relevant topics. After a thoughtful, critical discussion, participants went back to artmaking, revising their works of art based on a discussion of current events. After 40 minutes, everyone shared their collages and detailed what elements of Afrofuturism were reflected in their works of art.

Project Findings

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2 The three VTS curriculum questions are: what’s going on in this picture?; what do you see that makes you say that?; what more can we find?
I always thought of Afrofuturism as simply an imagination of a future without whiteness or the white lens. But I learned that it does draw on the past and focuses on injustice and oppression, which made me realize that Afrofuturism is the antithesis of Black erasure.

— Sam Busa, Art and Afrofuturism participant

The most surprising and satisfying element of this lesson happened when one of the participants challenged an assumption that I made about the Black Lives Matter protests and activist movements. I gave participants about 20 minutes to work on their collages initially, and then I stopped them and showed some images of the current protests and asked how we might view Black Lives Matter through an Afrofuturist lens. After thinking about it for a few moments, one of the participants remarked that they didn’t think the protests were Afrofuturist at all. They stated that the activism is directed towards white people, and Black people asking for the very basic request of not being murdered. There didn’t seem to be anything emancipatory or liberating or separately and powerfully Black in asking for the bare minimum consideration as human beings.

Others chimed in that they agreed with the point, and I asked if anyone else had a different perspective. One person felt like the cultural reckoning created by the protest and movements were making space for Black joy and Black lives not constrained or represented solely by oppression, and that felt relevant. Someone else mentioned that the greater societal awareness and acceptance of the need for strictly Black spaces aligned with Afrofuturist ideas. Another participant pointed out that the BLM movement was demanding an end to inherited violence and generational trauma, echoing the Afrofuturist theme of referencing and then re-imagining the past for the future.

While I planned on introducing current events to get the participants to reconsider their collages and think more critically about Afrofuturism, the conversation did not go in the direction I originally anticipated. I thought participants would feel compelled to layer in elements of current events into their collages. This did not occur, but the final discussion exemplified the Afrofuturist art educational strategy of working through the curriculum, which ultimately impacted the themes of their collages. For example, many focused the artmaking on representations of interiority—joy, space to grow—as a manifestation of the realizations they had during the art experience. The questions participants asked were beyond those that I could have anticipated as I planned the experience—the questions emerged through the lesson and had a profound impact on everyone involved in the art experience. Participants developed new tools to analyze and contextualize current events with the future in mind. In addition, the group did the work of challenging the existing power structures that demanded the need for protests as well as unpacking the goals and impact of the movements as well.

Participants were able to articulate and center a Black future, activating critical multicultural theory as they confronted the way their previous ideation of the future circulated around the axis of Whiteness. This transformation was apparent in their collages. One participant went back to their original list of words for the future and built a collage by rethinking each term using their newly developed Afrofuturist lens. Another included a call to action and structural changes in their representations (Figure 2). The collage features elements of text that reference...
privilege and wealth—calling into question who inherits these things and who does not. The participant used overlapping images of stars and the sky to indicate a different future filled with possibility, noting that she wanted the top of the collage to juxtapose the busy city scenes of the bottom to show something yet undiscovered.

Figure 2: Final collage from Art and Afrofuturism participant

One participant focused on alternative ways of knowing that relate to the earth (Figure 3). Their collage focused on generative power that exists outside of human hierarchies and systems of oppression and emphasized BIPOC traditions of land stewardship and conservation that are crucial for their imagined future. The participant overlaid images of vegetables with hand-drawn leaves, emphasizing growth and the blooming of something new. To reorient a magazine cut-out showing groupings of people, the participants colored in their bodies with pencil so their identities were confusing, emphasizing those who have been erased from their history, but also hinting at a shared commitment to the future.

Figure 3: Final collage from Art and Afrofuturism participant

Conclusion

In this paper, I have discussed an Art and Afrofuturism art experience that explored alternative narratives. The two-and-a-half-hour lesson was informed by critical multiculturalism theory and introduced participants to Afrofuturism through mass media depictions and artistic representations. The critical multiculturalism theoretical framework worked to challenge the expectation that the future is white in Western culture and asked participants to create a collage illustrating a more equitable future developed from the Afrofuturist themes discussed. In a post-lesson evaluation, participants reported finding the experience impactful and eye opening. It confronted their ways of seeing the world, inspired a critical examination of current events, and offered the group space to think of a future that is something different. In the same way that I was re-envisioning the curriculum, the participants were re-envisioning their futures. The Art and Afrofuturism art experience created a “counter-discursive space” that challenged established systems of understanding race and visual culture. The discussions participants had that challenged their unexamined ideologies are crucially important for white educators working with BIPOC students to also have. In addition, providing anyone space to consider and create alternative, equitable futures offers a powerful opportunity for tumultuous times.

References


