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Straight from the Underground

On Ecology in (my) Black Social Practice

Nsambu Za Suekama

2018 June 20

The following is the first in a series of reflections on radical Black ecopolitics/ecopoetics, which I've been trying to practice using Afrofuturism.

pt. 1, GroundWork

A shadow etches its way out of green grasses, revealing —

*— a wild child/who steady cheesin'
and schemin' wit the/breeze and the trees
I spit rhymes and/spin fables in my leaves
prophecies of good seeds/and miraculous deeds
Sunny days free/full of springtime soliloquies..."*
-prof.Ound

In *Afrofuturism 2.0 and the Black Speculative Art Movement: Notes on a Manifesto*, Reynaldo Anderson says of the Black Speculative Art Movement that it

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“freely embraces the Africanist approach to... other knowledge formations when formulating... theory and practice in relation to material reality.”

This approach is one which integrates speculation with the ecological and scientific, and the spiritual or metaphysical, because it sees them as

“overlapping zones.”

As an artist, an educator, a thinker, and an activist, I have long been influenced by Afrofuturism (or the Black Speculative Art Movement).

Afrofuturism (or the Black Speculative Arts movement) is a complex tradition in African and African Diasporic artistic and theoretical history. I loosely define it as a **constant, critical and creative re-assessment of boundaries** in society and thought, with an emphasis on **synthesizing tradition and science to re-create possibilities** for the future.

Afrofuturism is why, wherever prof.Ound goes, you see flowers, foliage, leaves, and plants all through my hair and body, and you will always hear some form of jazz music, hip-hop, or Afrobeat playing mysteriously from a speaker hidden on my person.

I am drawing on the **influences of folk like Sun Ra in the past and Janelle Monae today** (as well as the important interventions of Martine Syms) in creating a world-altering persona that has an activist intent.

Afrofuturism’s influence, however, also extends to my use of the ‘Africanist approach’ that Reynaldo Anderson speaks of when it comes to ‘knowledge formations.’

This is why **much of the work I strive to create is about community-centered education that is social-justice oriented, arts-based or imaginative, prayerful, and eco-political.**

I am a Black/Native, Christian, gender-fugitive, working class, and neurodivergent.

I work as an environmental educator in places like the South Bronx that are disproportionately affected by poverty, policing, and pollution.

My use of **Afrofuturism in the acquisition, production, and spread of knowledge is because** the ‘Africanist approach’ – which combines a constellation of perspectives, with multiple practical and theoretical skills – **allows me to most effectively and holistically engage the environmental and social issues that affect me** and my community.

When I was in college, I tried to design a major that would help me develop the **basis or frame** within which I could **practice study and arts-based education/activism in these organic, interdisciplinary ways that Afrofuturism leads me to.**

This basis/frame, I now call it ‘*GroundWork*,’ and the self-designed major, if I were to ever finish school would take on the name of **Ecology and Black Social Practice.**

GroundWork basically arises from a synthesis of human ecology with Black cultural/critical studies, but with a social practice focus.

Now, **all of those three together are very complex terms in themselves, defined in a number of ways.**

Through *GroundWork*, **I play with all those complexities**, learning about them and applying them to the conditions and situations that are emerging for me as important to understand and address.

So ***GroundWork* is a constant process.** That’s why I call it ‘work.’ This means that it provides the *grounds* for my brand of Afrofuturism in study; but, those *grounds* are not static or one-dimensional and have to constantly be engaged.

Visual representation of what *GroundWork* comes from. It’s a prism. Issues or phenomena, represented by white light, refract through three adjoined angles

– the latter of which are drawn from what I see as varied aesthetic, philosophical, theoretical preoccupations emerging for me as an Afrofuturist. That triangle represents my studies of the Arts and Artistic Production (especially Social Practice), Human Ecology (especially in the radical materialist tradition), and Cultural Studies or Critical Studies (particularly within the Black tradition). As the light enters them, it is refracted outward as a rainbow of knowledge. That rainbow is the major I tried to design.

To sum, *Groundwork* centers:

1. ongoing engagement with historical, aesthetic, philosophical, and theoretical preoccupations and practices within Black Speculative Art/Afrofuturism
2. use of this engagement in the process of learning, contributing to, and teaching theory and practice in the fields of ecology/environmental education.

But, how does that look CONCRETELY?

Let's flashback to end of last year. It was the fall, and just before I had decided to drop out of college. I was in an environmental history course.

The professor assigned a mid-term paper, and so I got a head start researching scholarship that I felt might be resonant with my interests: the environment, Blackness, Indigeneity, and the arts.

At some point, I accidentally stumbled on an essay:

Decolonizing place in early childhood studies: Thinking with Indigenous onto-epistemologies and Black feminist geographies

(it was co-authored by Fikile Nxumalo and Stacia Cedillo)

This post is too brief to fully tease out all aspects of the essay, but its overall push was suggestions for **using Black feminism and Indigenous thought to make environmental educa-**

allyship, on close reading, on self-acceptance, on political and scholarly discernment, and more. Yes, I was/am stubborn! But, thank you for sticking through me. In relation to the project at hand: throwing Black (feminist) geographies scholarship my way, especially in regards to the final paper I wrote for your postcolonial literature class — and helping me with writing and diggin into that paper itself!!! — really transformed my approach to ecology for good, making it more intersectional, and thus more robust and interdisciplinary than it ever could have been. I adore having you in my life.

Bless you all in Jesus' name,
and may living waters flow through and sustain you in your ways.
-prof.Ound

tion less Euro-centered, less male-centered, and less human-centered.

When I say this was so uncannily what I needed to read I am not exaggerating. I also cannot express how hyped I was. Yo, when Nxumalo and Cedillo wrote:

“educators can draw inspiration from Black speculative fiction in... co-creating with children... environmentally attuned literary representations that situate Black childhood in... ‘nature.’”

I got so happy I had to —

And then, when they was like how this strategic, co-generative use of Black Speculative Art becomes useful in:

“resist[ing] images of Black children as out-of-place in nature.”

I was like —

Cuz, for a little while since I'd first gotten into Afrofuturism in 2015 (thanks to a talk that Dr. Hazel Carby gave at Muhlenberg College during my first year), I had been meditating on *how* or *if* I should even use Afrofuturism in environmental education/study in the first place.

I was hesitant to do so because I hadn't really read anything on that; neither had I really found any Afrofuturist work which dealt with environmental themes (or, rather, how normatively we think of those).

Furthermore, despite feeling inclined to do it, in my journey with my self-designed major, folk were beginning to make feel like they wanted me to give up trying to integrate so many different/dissipate fields of thought in my major. I'd essentially be drawing (primarily) from environmental science, Black studies, performance studies, education — all of which are already multidisciplinary.

After reading Nxumalo and Cedillo's essay, tho, I felt confident in moving forward. And I felt inspired.

What they were suggesting sounded very much like what I try to engage in with *GroundWork*: an **interdisciplinary artistic, educational, and research practice that draws from critical studies (such as Black feminism) and deals with environmental issues.**

Energized by what I had read from Fikile Nxumalo and Stacia Cedillo, I **started to re-visit well-known Afrofuturist medias I had encountered before, but with new eyes.** I was ready to start actively deploying them in my environmental work.

So, I started writing down ideas of how I would do so.

The Warriors Return by Abdul Qadim Haqq is the centerfold for Drexciya's album *Neptune's Lair. Five aquatic beings, warriors* are "returning home to the Bubble Metropolis after battling."

Suddenly, the music and mythos of the Detroit duo *Drexciya* held potential for both education around Trans-Atlantic social and religious history, but **creative thinking about pollution of oceans, waterways, etc. that have increased alongside the entrenchment of black struggle under capitalism, the state, and imperial/settler colonialism.**

A still from Wanuri Kahiu's "Pumzi." Asha, a young Kenya woman, reaches out toward a tree in a futuristic world pretty much devoid of nature and clean water.

Similarly, the world and imagery in the short film *Pumzi* by Wanuri Kahiu began to hold potential for **thinking about water scarcity, technology, militarism, authority and labor.**

Also, if we're thinking about Syms' *Mundane Afrofuturism*, I began to think more about speculating on the (possible) 'environmentalism' of everyday Black cultural life and experience (I'm looking

My little brothers Samuel and Daniel, who have been so creative, so open, and so inspiring with their enthusiasm for the small Afrofuturist performances we've been creating for your home-school sessions. I can't wait to pick back up on the story again when the school year returns. I love where your minds go! I can't wait to conjure some more.

My Black (and Brown) Anarchist crew (y'all know who y'all are!) Seriously, tho ya are the BEST! Talking with you is always a dance through constellations of theory, constellations of feeling, constellations of memory. It is magnificently mycelial and I'm forever grateful for y'all.

Amirio Freeman, with the tenderness of your works' tendrils. Oh how your ecopoiesis is admirable (maybe enviable! haha). Though we haven't known each other for that long, I'm so hyped that we are connected.

Maura Finkelstein, because you were such a treasure and light for me while I was at that school. And because *The Anthropology of Global Cities*, especially sections that dealt with food politics and environmental racism, is forever engrained in my mind, and now part of my core intellectual concerns. Thank you, always.

Wilhelmina Minney, babygirl, you/were/the grains/of sand, which, pregnant with bright warmth/nursed my cold body back to life/after my shrunken form was released from the abyss. Your (active) love was the original medicine for this maroon. Thank you for continuing to teach me how to get lost in the wild...

And lastly, but most absolutely not the least, the brilliant Dr. Frederick Charles Staidum, Jr. A thousand and one essential lessons I have gleaned from you: on

I was listening to you and Dr. Truscott speak. Talks with you, furthermore, have also given me ideas of how exactly I might approach the question of ‘majors’ should I ever return to school.

Vernon A. Jordan III, aka Moonflower — because you situate yourself as a jazz negro, and as soft soil-sibling, thus always inspiring me. Plus, your deployment of ‘Sankofa’ in your Afrofuturist practice (which I witnessed at the film workshop you held at Berg) got me speculating on the potential for its applications to Black ecology. And, is why I started using the phrase ‘sankofism’ to describe aspects of Afrofuturism.

Asherde Gill, my homie, because you’re just an awesome friend who is doing their own *GroundWork*, with similar concerns, but autonomously generated! Seeing you begin your cyborgs project, and you telling me about What a Plant Knows: A Field Guide to the Senses: Daniel Chamovitz really really really really oxygenized me as I began to take the Afrofuturism-in-environmental study journey more seriously — because you are doing it too!

Jasmine Benitez and Kayla Miller (as well as Tyreke, Robert, Shakieva, Sam Marquand, and so many more beautiful faces in the Public Programs and larger Rocking the Boat community!!!) because where I would never have thought to EVER share one of the pieces that I’ve developed through *GroundWork*, but your encouragement, your openness, your advice/suggestions, the spaces y’all provided, and your own bodies of knowledge helped that become a reality. And, as a result, we created an awesome set of experiences with students from Bronx Academy of Multi-Media, and I will never get over that.

all that tupper-ware in my cabinets and them plastic bags full of plastic bags, y’all know what I mean, come on...)

Taking trips through these diverse trails of thought within Black Studies (especially Black radicalism), journeys kick-started by the aesthetic practices of Afrofuturism, and centered on environmental thinking — a certain tripartite experience of learning began to consolidate.

(psst... remember the triangle image from earlier)

Soon, as a result, I was developing my own artistic pieces and holding workshops situated in what I now call *GroundWork*, and was beginning to understand Ecology and Black Social Practice better.

I have even started to come up with scientific and historical research questions, inspired by my arts-focused engagement with scholarship.

Thus, my studies, my art, my activism, and my work — they are all tying together and, finally, starting to become more intimately clear to me.

Reynaldo Anderson says in *Afrofuturism 2.0 & The Black Speculative Art Movement: Notes on a Manifesto*:

“Black speculative art is a creative, aesthetic practice that integrates African diasporic or African metaphysics with science or technology and seeks to interpret, engage, design, or alter reality for the re-imagination of the past, the contested present, and as a catalyst for the future.

As the perils and dangers of climate change and environmental death become more apparent to modern human society, Black study and Black resistance must freely embrace ‘coming straight from the underground.’

I mean this figuratively — implying our ‘outsider-ness,’ — by appreciating our autonomous, marginalized traditions: old and new,

spiritual and social, philosophical and political. I, however, also mean this literally — implying things like the lithosphere, ground-water, trees, plants, land, air, etc — by appreciating and centering the ‘environment’ from which we and our traditions emerge and with which we and our traditions exist.

I say this because I feel this is the only way our radicalism can be robust enough, eradicatory enough, to pull at all the material and discursive roots of the Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Androcene, etc.

An abolitionist ecology — that has as its animus the scientific+metaphysical synthesis and/or ‘sankofaism’ which is Afrofuturism’s hallmark, thus the almost mycorrhizal ‘Africanist approach’ that Reynaldo Anderson speaks of — this is vital, if we are to address ecocide from within the paradox of Black placelessness despite Black importance in the environmental movement.

Efforts like my own *GroundWork* (and that of my inspirations, and even of folk I have yet to encounter) are trying to sow these seeds.

“When on my knees/I pray to God to deliver me from the thieves

they uproot/and chop me up/to make fuel for their machines

I can’t breathe/asthma alley/I’m starting to wheeze

blow up this world/to smithereens/it’s the pessimist’s dream

insurrectionary/the soil’s gonna have to upheave

and since negroes need to grow/we’ll be the thorns at your feet...”

-prof.Ound

I want to give special shout-outs in the writing of this piece:

Christ, who cares for even the grass of the field, and who raises up even stones to proclaim God’s glory. Knowing this really animates me.

My parents, whose childrearing practice was the first *GroundWork* academy. Yes, that complex mix of religion, science, politics, and music that comes with living under your roof is what set me on this trajectory!

Aquehung, aka The Bronx River, because on and around you a range of dreams/memories/future-visions/hopes regarding community, healing, growth, openness have concretely emerged within my life. Such an experience is my brand of Afrofuturism embodied and nobody but you and I get that. May my dreams forever carry me to your waters; and may my feet ever materialize those journeys in the wake world.

Dr. Cristal Chanelle Truscott, whose *SoulWork* method got me thinking about studying the ‘nature’ (character) of Afrocentric performance, which then made me curious about studying ‘nature’ **through** Afrocentric performance. For this reason, the theme of this piece *GroundWork* is spelled similar to *SoulWork*. Thank you, always!!!

Dr. Sharell D. Luckett, whose performance studies class got me thinking about trying to ‘intimate nature in black theatre’ (although I never got to write the paper on it); such thinking was central to me re-assessing my self-designed major in the ways this piece talks about. It was also an extension of the curiosities I mentioned above, which started when