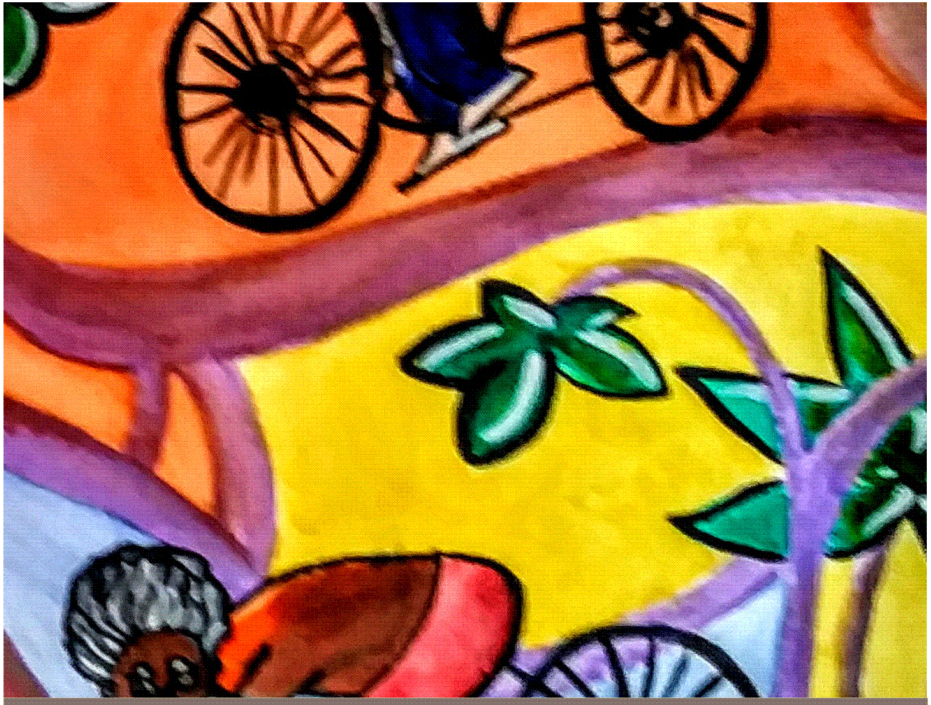

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AFROFUTURISM & POSSIBILITIES FOR DECOLONIZING THE ACADEMY

AFROFUTURISMO E POSSIBILIDADES PARA DESCOLONIZAR A ACADEMIA

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RESUMO:

Atos históricos e contemporâneos de opressão racial tornaram mais visíveis os abusos casuais contra corpos negros e pardos, o que traz implicações para o ensino superior e os assuntos estudantis. Além disso, uma lente eurocêntrica geralmente domina a pedagogia e o currículo no ensino superior dos EUA. Aqueles que estão na luta pela equidade e justiça racial precisam imaginar que a libertação é possível. Este ensaio analisa e examina questões conceituais, definições e possibilidades que centralizam o afrofuturismo e a opressão racial. O afrofuturismo pode servir como um meio de tecno-cultura para criar explicitamente um futuro anti-racista que envolve as mudanças nas relações de ficção especulativa, preocupações da comunidade negra e da sociedade como um todo (Anderson & Jones, 2016). O afro-futurismo é um canal de ficção científica que fornece um meio para novas possibilidades, livres das restrições da opressão racial pela vida negra na academia. Profissionais de ensino superior na região oeste dos EUA serão pesquisados em torno dos tópicos de afro-futurismo e opressão racial no ensino superior. As respostas serão analisadas usando os Projetos Indígenas das Metodologias de Descolonização de Smith (1999) e as cinco Práticas Promissoras para a Excelência Inclusiva (Salazar, Norton e Tuitt, 2010), uma ferramenta culturalmente responsiva para transformar abordagens pedagógicas.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Afrofuturismo; Descolonização; Pedagogia culturalmente responsiva.

ABSTRACT:

Historic and contemporary acts of racial oppression has made casual abuse against black and brown bodies more visible, which carry implications for higher education & student affairs. In addition, a Eurocentric lens often dominates pedagogy and curriculum in U.S. higher education. Those who are in the struggle for equity and racial justice need to imagine that liberation is possible. This essay reviews and examines conceptual issues, definitions, and possibilities that center Afrofuturism and racial oppression. Afrofuturism can serve as a medium of techno-culture to explicitly create an anti-racist future that engages the changing relations of speculative fiction, concerns of the Black community, and society as a whole (Anderson & Jones, 2016). Afro-futurism is a channel of science fiction that provides a means for new possibilities free from the restraints of racial oppression for Black life in the academy. Higher education professionals in the West Region of the U.S. will be surveyed surrounding the topics of afro-futurism and racial oppression in higher education. Responses will be analyzed using Indigenous Projects from Smith's (1999) Decolonizing Methodologies, and the five Promising Practices for Inclusive Excellence (Salazar, Norton, & Tuitt, 2010), a culturally-responsive tool for transforming pedagogical approaches.

KEYWORDS: Afrofuturism; Decolonization; Culturally-responsive pedagogy.

INTRODUCTION

Academia's origin in the United States carries a substantial history of nepotism and exclusion. Those of higher economic status, commonly White Christian men, formed the initial spaces for higher education. Common career trajectories for college graduates were apprenticeships with slave traders and other roles that regenerated the economy through living amongst slaveholder interest communities. Plantations were converted into colleges- and some colleges, such as today's University of Philadelphia, had a financial investment in slaving voyages that brought indigenous Africans to the U.S (Wilder, 2014; Mannix & Cowley, 1972). Even in New England, male leaders in higher education were instrumental in the development of efforts to deport free Black people. For example, the White Colonization Society, founded in 1817, was intended to lead programmatic efforts to deport free Black people. The Immigration Act (1924) was in affect at the time, which restricted people of many racial backgrounds from being in the U.S. By acknowledging the Immigration Act which restricted free Blacks living in the

United States, it is clear who may be excluded in the historical structures and functions of secondary and post-secondary education.

Indigenous Africans from various countries were forcibly removed and transported to various parts of America to be owned by civilians, and obey them by force. Higher education institutions across the U.S., like Harvard University and Texas A&M, were built through the labor of these enslaved indigenous Africans, or Black people, and many institutions sit on former plantation grounds (Wilder, 2014). Their roles contained building the structures, cooking, and maintaining other service operations of the institutions.

PEDAGOGICAL NORMS

Historical foundations help convey which dominant populations received the benefits of education in the early years of the United States of America. An integral relationship within educational systems is between the teacher and the student (Freire, 2007). For example, Freire (2007) explains the banking system as a concept to help understand the dynamics of the student-teacher relationship. A number of attitudes and practices associated with the banking system include (a) the teacher providing knowledge in the classroom, while students don't have that knowledge and are expected to listen, (b) the teacher is the subject of the learning process, while students are the objects of the process, and (c) the teacher conflates authority of knowledge and professional authority, while students adapt and act at-will of the teacher (Freire, 2007). In this model students are not traditionally meant to think independently and critically, but rather to regurgitate content back to the instructor. Within the banking system, dominant populations whom academia served in its' early stages also weren't encouraged to engage in independent, scholarly, and critical thought.

DECOLONIZING THE ACADEMY

Wilder (2014) examines how administrators in the early years of U.S. higher education of were instrumental participants in efforts to forcibly remove mass amounts of indigenous Africans. Black people and their resources were stolen from Africa, used to build the home environments within the U.S., and possessing and selling their bodies were used for the benefit of White people through slavery (Wilder, 2014). Through Tuck & Yang's (2012) lens of settler colonialism, it is explained that prisons in the U.S. are a manifestation of colonization. Prisons are modern day evolutions of plantations, a mechanism for to establish dominance and control through mass colonization of indigenous Africans. Functions of prisons mirror plantations, and the prison population disproportionately represents Black people (Alexander, 2012). The removal of indigenous Africans from their land destroyed possibilities for the continent to further enrich their cultural capital through sustaining the initial integrity of all aspects of it's cultures.

Colonization in America has connections to the people who sustain higher education environments, and the regions that institutions live amongst. Tuck & Yang (2012) explain settler colonialism as a form of colonialism where settlers take space, create home within the elements of that space, and control all within in their jurisdiction. The role of higher education excluding and enslaving of Black people and the favoring Eurocentric ideologies in school settings mirror realities within settler colonialism.

Wald & Losen's (2003) school-to-prison pipeline theory helps us understand that Black students are more likely to experience long term impacts from the harsh realities of the prison-like environments of classrooms, harsh policies, and under investment from school administrators. Alexander (2012) analyzes several studies to convey that Black students who use drugs are more likely to receive drug charges than white students. Students can receive punishments that lead to entrance into the criminal justice system, and actually be arrested within the halls of schools. Arrests and the onset

of relationships with the criminal justice system are regular results of the school-to-prison pipeline.

Decolonization in a settler context could involve seizing wealth, property, and land to return to Black, brown, and indigenous American communities from postcolonial persons (Tuck & Yang, 2012). Current interpretations of decolonization see the idea as a metaphor for social justice, which erases the existence of settler colonialism acquiring things such as land, labor, or wealth (Tuck & Yang, 2012). Decolonization, can be used as way to both imagine and create new realities for Black people through projects that assist in reparations that could include; restitution of property and educational property, wealth, legal status, human rights, dual citizenships, and land (Smith, 2013). In academia, decoloniality as a framework can create reparations to the harsh realities of displacement, mental health, and other factors that contribute to the deterioration of the lives of Black people in the U.S.

AFROFUTURISM

Afrofuturism is a mechanism to imagine and create different realities that are free from the restrictions of colonization and racial oppression. Any narrative or cultivated experience related to Black people that does not currently exist could be a manifestation of afrofuturism (Imarisha, 2015). Traditional understandings of science fiction allude to new understandings of life and technologies. Technocultures and futures within afrofuturism include a plethora of domains, including; film, music, activism, teaching, writing, and other art mediums (Dery, 1993). Sun Ra, one of the grandparents of afrofuturism, was a jazz composer who cultivated cosmic experiential and theatrical performances that connected to the liberation of Black peoples (Coney, 1974). In the motion picture Space Is the Place, Sun Ra mentors Black youth to explore different choices that are reflective of the capacity to freer lives as adults (Coney, 1974).

Intergenerational approaches to liberating Black people from racial oppression is a direct connection to the impacts of his afrofuturist practice. Butler's (2014) work states:

> Once or twice
> each week
> A Gathering of Earthseed
> is a good and necessary thing.
> It vents emotion, then
> quiets the mind.
> It focuses attention,
> strengthens purpose, and
> unifies people.

Butler defines Earthseed to be a religion where the ideology "God is change" is adopted. The idea of change in Butler's work provides the possibility for new futures, whether they are good or bad. The opportunity for continuous change is based on needs that surface from an individual (Butler, 2014). Change can also provide a sense of clarity and foundation, which could rectify the implications of feeling erasure around a particular lived experience. Unity and strength can be applied to an afrofuturist context due to it depicting realities of what liberated Black peoples may look like.

Speculative fiction is an umbrella of science fiction that accounts for narrative-based bodies of work (Imarisha, 2015). Limitations of the current world can be lifted by utilizing speculative fiction as a medium for storytelling. Speculative fiction that addresses Black thought, culture, and addresses concerns of Black communities through technoculture or reflections of an enhanced future can be referred to as afrofuturism (Dery, 1993). Imarisha (2015) reflects on the work of community organizing depending on free-thinking, which gives speculative fiction the ability be applied in and out of classroom context. The exploration of imagined realities or futures that are free from the restraints of racial oppression and colonization in education could provide freedom through domains of the mind, body, health and wellness, and social status.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The purpose of this study was to determine how afrofuturist practices can adopt both culturally-responsive pedagogy, and a decolonized framework to counter Eurocentric perspectives in education. Two theoretical frameworks will review ways in which applying afrofuturism in speculative fiction is both culturally-responsive and decolonized. Smith (1999) outlines a series of projects that are decolonized methodologies that aim to reach levels of ideas, policy, and preserve culture and language. These projects involve major themes, including:

> (a) claiming, (b) testimonies, (c) storytelling, (d) celebrating survival, (e) remembering, (f) indigenizing, (g), intervening, (h) revitalizing, (i) connecting, (j) reading, (k) writing, (l) representing, (m) gendering, (n) envisioning, (o) reframing, (p) restoring, (q) returning, (r) democratizing, (s) networking, (t) naming, (u) protecting, (v) creating, (w) negotiating, (x) discovering, and (y) sharing.

Culturally-responsive pedagogy is a method of teaching that enables the integrity of each learner to be sustained in a fashion where everyone receives access to educational mobility in direct opposition to traditional understandings of teaching and learning in the classroom (Wlodkowski & Ginsberg, 1995). This pedagogy rejects those traditional practices that reinforce systems of oppression (Freire, 2007). Salazar, Norton, & Tuitt (2010) created five promising practices for inclusive excellence which outline culturally responsive mechanisms that break barriers of the traditional educational environment: (a) intrapersonal awareness, (b) interpersonal awareness, (c) curricular transformation, (d) inclusive pedagogy, and (e) inclusive learning environments. Smith's (1999) twenty-five decolonizing methodologies project contain dimensions that are identical to aspects of the five promising practices for inclusive excellence. This study acknowledges that the five promising practices for inclusive excellence as a way of employing decolonized practice in higher education. Additionally, because Black people were displaced in the U.S. and exploited due to colonization, the twenty-five Decolonizing Methodologies is used to examine meaningful ways to reclaim, preserve, and repair Black and indigenous Black culture and wealth (Mannix & Cowley, 1972;

Wilder, 2014; Smith, 2013; Imarisha, 2015). Afrofuturism is an additional tool this study uses to analyze possible decolonized realities for Black people.

METHODOLOGY

In understanding the existing afrofuturist pedagogical practices through a decolonized lens, an ethnography format as utilized for the study. Ethnography is a qualitative mechanism to further understand behavior occurring in their natural environments, and can be done by engaging through dialogue and critical reflection (Preissle & Le Compte, 1984). Ethnography brings lived experiences to the center (Preissle & Le Compte, 1984) and utilizing it in relationship with decolonizing methodologies and culturally-responsive pedagogy allows for a deeper and more comprehensive analysis of the semi-structured interviews. Additionally, this format was utilized in a time where there is increased political contention around Black identity, and provides practical insights that bring some of these crises to term.

In order to apply the ethnography format, semi-structured interviews were conducted. Semi-structured interviews are formatted in a formal set-up and follow a set of questions, but allows for trajectories in conversation when appropriate (Drever, 1995). The format also necessitates not deviating from the topic, but have the flexibility to deviate in the manner in which we arrive to the topic. These interviews took place through the office phone of the participants to allow for a remote discussion in the natural workspaces that they occupy on their campuses.

The longest interview lasted 66 minutes, and the shortest lasted 21 minutes in length. The semi-structured interviews were transcribed and then used to identify reactions and feelings that were reoccurring in the open coding process. The interviews were then analyzed through the lens of decolonizing methodologies projects and the five promising practices for inclusive excellence. The study examined the following questions:

1. How might afro-futurism be a mechanism for reparations of indigenous Black life?
2. Explain how perspectives of afro-futurisms help enhance storytelling, and critical discussions with students.
3. Are histories and contributions of peoples in the African diaspora be acknowledged through afro-futurism in your work? Provide examples.
4. Inclusive pedagogy necessitates students co-constructing knowledge. How does co-construction of knowledge exist within afro-futurist practice?
5. How might personal stories of survival provide a speculative space free from the restraints of racial oppression?

Participants were recruited for through email announcements to various faculty groups who engage in Black critical theory. Email recipients were asked to share with their personal networks. A total of 4 higher education faculty members from two Mid-West, one Central, and one East Coast four-year public institution participated in the study.

INTERPRETING THE ETHNOGRAPHY

In the analysis phase, there were several recurring themes that surfaced while reviewing the semi-structured interviews. The most prominent themes or reactions that emerged from the analysis were utilized to further describe the experiences. Themes in the analysis are: revival, nuanced ways of storytelling, and coalition-building. Revival represents the potential that afrofuturism has to restore aspects on indigenous Black culture in education environments. Nuanced ways of storytelling symbolizes new mechanisms and loosened restrictions that facilitate learning processes within education. This also helps preserve survival narratives of Black populations. The last theme that emerged was coalition-building, which describes how Black identity is centered in afrofuturism, but pivots on the coexistence of other identity groups. Coalition-building correlates to the interpersonal awareness promising practice, as it

calls for educators to honor multiple perspectives and foster an environment for various cultural exchanges. Each theme illuminates how the contents of the five promising practices of inclusive excellence, twenty-five projects for Decolonizing Methodologies, and afrofuturism work together to address the goal of liberating Black peoples from oppression through the academy.

Revival. All interviews illuminated the reality that language, culture, tribal identity, stories, and other aspects of indigenous Black culture were tampered with and destroyed. They also connect the absence of major elements of Black culture in common classroom curricula, leading to the justification of others making their own choices in how to value and treat Black culture. Afrofuturism provides a mechanism to reclaim or revive resources that were taken from Black peoples amongst learning environments with students. Reparations of indigenous life are interconnected with Europeans, since European peoples assisted in the facilitation of mass colonization and enslavement of indigenous Africans. The use of afrofuturism in educational environments puts populations in a position to explore the conditions of the continent, both pre-slave trade extraction, and post-extraction. The intrapersonal awareness promising practice with an Afrofuturist calls for educators to expand knowledge of cultures in the African diaspora and their identity groups, and identify their connections and differences. A pedagogical effort to "revive" indigenous stories across the African diaspora directly opposes Eurocentric pedagogical methods reinforce a dominant culture (Friere, 1970). In addition, afrofuturism allows power in the classroom environment to be redistributed, which is in direct opposition to dominant groups holding the most power under the conditions of racial oppression and colonization.

Nuanced Storytelling. Afrofuturism heightens the manner in which students engage in storytelling in academia. Perceptions of time, reality, and conditions of environment within critical dialogue with students can be altered through the application of an afrofuturist lens. Colonization and racial oppression help determine structural inequities that disproportionately impact Black people in U.S. Afrofuturism also provides the

possibility to create realities that are free from some of these restraints. Time is a moldable medium within critical dialogue amongst students, that was salient in the semi-structured interview responses. In dialogue with an afrofuturist lens, the past is directly connected to the present and depends on one another. This helps reject the assumption that the academy is race neutral, apolitical, and ahisoritcal. The inclusive excellence promising practice applied to an afrofuturist context would allow students to be co-constructers of classroom material and learning discourse that connects Black identity with speculative fiction (Salazar, Norton, & Tuitt, 2010). Scholar-practitioners who were interviewed for the study use to traditional classroom practices that largely disregard Black culture, the scholar-practitioners interviewed incorporate history and contributions of people in the African diaspora so their stories continue to exist.

Coalition-Building. Classrooms typically contain students who bring different experiences to the classroom, and are expected to engage with one another to facilitate the learning process (Freire, 2007). The interviews also alluded to the liberation of Black people being interconnected with needs in other social movements. Afrofuturism helps with the call to work in coalition with other social identity groups in the process of liberating Black people. Co-construction of knowledge, a core component of culturally-responsive pedagogy, connects with the notion of all people involved in a group being invested with the needs of each other in order to reach individual goals (Wlodkowski & Ginsberg, 1995; Taylor, 2016). Taylor's (2016) analysis on coalition-building being connected to Black liberation ideology mirrors afrofuturism in practice and is used in various afrofuturist curriculums. Texts and media who borrow from ideas of afrofuturism often include people of different races, genders, sexualities, abilities, and other social identity groups (Imarisha, 2015). In a classroom context, afrofuturism fosters the opportunity for honoring different perspectives through cultural exchanges to benefit Black people, which is reflected in the interpersonal awareness promising practice (Salazar, Norton, & Tuitt, 2010). Afrofuturism has the potential to do this work because it is does not produce Black only forms of art- but rather, Black visioned and led.

DISCUSSION

Earlier, there was an indication that themes that recurred the most in the study were centralized and identified. Culturally-responsive pedagogy and decolonization shaping the analysis of the study allows for a framework that interrogates how the contents of each framework can work together in the practice of afrofuturism. Texts, films, music, poetry, visual art, gaming, and other mediums for afrofuturism can be applied in syllabi and campus programming, and reflects practices that foster inclusive excellence (Salazar, Norton, & Tuitt, 2010). The five promising practices of inclusive excellence, twenty-five projects for Decolonizing Methodologies, and afrofuturism work together to address the goal of liberating Black peoples from oppression through the academy (Salazar, Norton, & Tuitt, 2010; Smith, 1999; Imarisha, 2015). Co-construction of knowledge is a major aspect of culturally-responsive pedagogy, and the five promising practices for inclusive excellence (Salazar, Norton, & Tuitt, 2010). This aspect was adopted in the research process through the format of the semi-structured interviews allowing for discussion and nuanced conversation. The professional experiences shared during the interviews suggest that co-construction of knowledge is an imperative first step in gaining insights to new realities for Black lives. The ways the interviews detailed the knowledge processes enhanced conditions of the storytelling decolonizing methodology (Smith, 1999). Although tools with an afrofuturist lens are available to be employed in academia, readers should consider this analysis as an entry point in the discussion of Black liberation, and refrain from misinterpretations of the study.

The histories and contributions to society from Black populations also was an essential component of afrofuturist work program curricula in the provided examples. Increase in access through admission to Black people as a reparation for slave labor used to facilitate the construction of colleges is one example from the interview. Also, addressing the contributions of marginalized peoples and harm that was perpetrated against them can help campuses move forward from social unrest, and support retention rates (Millem, Chang, Antonia, 2005). Black people experience erasure in culture due to racism and Eurocentric perspectives employed in education, and afrofuturism can help place histories of Black people back into existence. Learning

processes are connected to how students make their own interpretations of afrofuturism. Imarisha (2015) features a collection of authors including Alexis Pauline Gumbs, who connects learning and growth as normal processes. Gumbs also asserts that readers are making their ancestors happy by engaging in this process.

Afrofuturism can be used as a mechanism for healing and upward mobility for Black populations at college campuses amongst times of political unrest. As afrofuturism works to create realities free from the restraints of oppression, there is a call to acknowledge the Black folks whose racial oppression is further exacerbated by holding other marginalized identities. Gay's (2016) work with Black Panther employs an afrofuturism lens, and illuminates the connectedness of femme, queer, and Black people named the Dora Milaje, who aided the liberation of communities experiencing harm. Monae (2018) also centers race, femininity, and self-love of the body in their latest album release, which also adopt afrofuturist practices. Classroom curricula that acknowledges the other oppressed identities Black people hold ensures the realities that are imagined in the classroom are free from the restraints of all forms of oppression that Black people experience.

CLOSING

Common assumptions surrounding Black people who live in the U.S. suggest that their culture only exists within the physical bounds of the country. Those ideas must be rejected, and conversations around colonization, displacement, extraction, and reclamation of Black culture must begin amongst students and education administrators. Afrofuturism calls upon notions of decolonization through storytelling and imagining redistribution of resources and land. Wilder (2014) explains that Black people were heavily harmed by professionals in the early years of higher education. A mechanism of Afrofuturism that addresses this history is Black students in higher education being considered legacy admits. Culturally-responsive pedagogy suggests that cultural capital and the lived experiences of students help facilitate a more accessible learning process (Wlodkowski & Ginsberg, 1995). Practitioners who use afrofuturism should be race-conscious, and also be willing to deviate from Eurocentric standards of

curriculum development. This study only begins to address what liberation of Black people from racism and decolonization could look like, and the call to create new possible realities.

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