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IN SEARCH OF AFRO-SOLARPUNK

Parts 1 & 2



Written by Rob Cameron for tor.com

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Part 1: Elements of Afrofuturism

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Afrofuturism and solarpunk, powers combined. Everybody loves a team-up. Crossover events are a big deal...like Nutella mixed with good Trinidadian rum. Two things that *must* go well together and, MY GOD, how could it be that this hasn't been a staple of the food pyramid since 1972?

The intersection of Afrofuturism and solarpunk was the topic of a panel I suggested and moderated at Readercon 30 (you can watch the [video of the panel here](#)). My guests were [Cadwell Turnbull](#), [Michael J. DeLuca](#), and Readercon guest of honor [Tananarive Due](#). The four of us and the audience (standing room only) took a tour of West Africa, the Caribbean, and the East Coast of the United States to explore story possibilities in each region that combined issues familiar to both subgenres.

It was dope. Fifty minutes of insightful, intelligent, (hopefully) inspiring conversation, and we barely scratched the surface. The inevitable consequence of a panel discussion like ours is that it leaves the audience thirsty for more. Unfortunately, there is currently a severe shortage of Afro-solarpunk stories being published. That shortage, in fact, was the impetus for the panel.

Tananarive Due teaches Afrofuturism at UCLA and she has seen little if any crossover between the two subgenres. Michael DeLuca publishes the journal [Reckoning: Creative Writing on Environmental Justice](#). He is hunting for said crossover stories. While he has published Afrofuturist stories that address ecological concerns, they don't really fit the solarpunk model (more on exactly what that is in part two of this essay).

Cadwell's novel, [The Lesson](#), is closer to Afro-solarpunk than most, but the involvement of alien technology in creating ecofriendly habitats is an element that again strains solarpunk conventions.

[Milton Davis](#) is a well-known author, anthologist of Black speculative fiction, and proponent of indie publishing. I asked him to point me towards more stories that fit the bill. Yet what he sent me was much more eco than solarpunk (there's a difference) and clearly dystopian, the antithesis of solarpunk.

Afrofuturism and solarpunk have been around long enough to have met in a crowded SOHO bar and taken a selfie together. Yet here we are. What follows is an examination of the barriers between the two and how we might break them. But first, let's get better acquainted with our subjects on their own terms. This essay, part one, will explore Afrofuturism: the name, the need, its position within or adjacent to science fiction, and some of its characteristics that I believe make for a fruitful pairing. The following essay, part two, will do the same with solarpunk, try to understand the barriers, and discuss possibilities for bringing these subgenres together.

What's in a Name?

In general, I hesitate to too firmly attach a label to anything, and the stories that would be Afrofuturism are exceptionally mercurial. There have been many names: Afrofuturism, Black sci-fi, Écriture Noire, Afrodiasporic writing, Black *anti*-science fiction (Yaszek, 2006).

[Alondra Nelson](#) founded the Afrofuturism listserv in 1998, possibly the first digital network of creatives to collectively self-identify as Afrofuturist. There they discussed works that told stories about culture, technology, science fiction imagery, futurism, and innovation as it related to Black communities. It was a sounding board and crossroads where artists, writers, and musicians collectively built the aesthetic that they called Afrofuturism, a term first coined by [Mark Dery](#) (Nelson, 2002).

As Tananarive Due told us during the panel, there are now artists and authors who much prefer the term “[Black Speculative Arts Movement](#).” They have gained traction. Tananarive herself sees Afrofuturism and Black speculative arts as synonymous umbrella terms expansive enough to shelter stories of science fiction, fantasy, horror, and magical realism, amongst other subgenres.

While it seems we are free to use either term at the same taxonomic level, for the purposes of our inquiry, I will temporarily reclassify Afrofuturism as a subgenre within Black speculative arts to narrow our focus. The combined root and suffix are semiotically more relevant to our search for congruence with solarpunk. Futurism implies a special relationship with technology and time. But here we must take more than a moment to distinguish the futurism of mainstream science fiction from that of Afrofuturism while at the same time preempting the inevitable question, “Why must color or race hyphenate science fiction at all?” It's important to make this clear, because the answer has implications for the combination of Afrofuturism and solarpunk.

- 7: It seems that there's been some reconciliation, but neither group is going away.
- 8: Both European and Chinese firms are taking advantage of African countries in the same way, though lately it seems that China has the upper hand.
- 9: These stores are in stark contrast to T.X. Watson's "The Boston Hearth Project," in Sunvault: Stories of Solarpunk and Eco-Speculation. Anarchists infiltrated and took-over a high-tech closed-ecosystem hotel in Boston. They successfully hacked the building, beat-up the police with ninja-parkour, and negotiated with the city to turn the building into a homeless shelter.
- 10: "Institutions of Democracy in Africa: How the Rules of the Game Shape Political Development" by Nic Cheeseman is a valuable resource in understanding the impact of local forces, post-colonial politics, and future global trends. Africa is where you will find the greatest variety of live experiments in democratic order in the midst of climate change.
- 11: Her anthology "Glass and Gardens: Solarpunk Summers" is the latest and most hopeful of the solarpunk anthologies (all of which have been published within four years of each other).
- 12: The first four were taken from FIYAH Magazine's issue themed around nature.

Necessary Pressure

"In order that we may survive...our kind of evolution is better than theirs...Nature blundered when she made those brutes. Take it from me, it is not mere chance that gave [our species] a long lead over their competitors...in the race toward evolution and a higher form of life. Whatever we may be we are less fiendish than they are." Excerpt taken from *White Lily* (later retitled *The Crystal Horde*) by John Taine, 1930 (Santesso, 2014).

At a convention not-to-be-named, the moderator on a panel on utopianism remarked, "Science fiction has always been inclusive." If you come across a similar statement on the interwebs and need quick and dirty ammo for your retort, you can thank author Nisi Shawl. She has gone ahead and done the homework for you by [creating a timeline of prominent black science fiction stories](#). Nisi points out a decades-wide gap in the literary record from the late Twenties and into the mid-Forties. What you will find instead is the rise of pulp science fiction and fantasy.

The Pulp Era was instrumental in establishing the imagery, tropes and themes at the core of modern science fiction, much of which was adapted from and inspired by the futurist literary and cinematic art movements from earlier in the century. Unfortunately, that heritage also transmitted stories normalizing primitivism, scientific racism, eugenics, anti-Semitism, and associated reinforcing fascist constructs (Santesso, 2014).

It is an open debate as to how much this toxic schema of the pulp era stories continues to influence modern sci-fi. The Futurians could only do so much. To the extent that this demon has been exorcised—[if it has truly been exorcised at all](#)—one could point to the rise of critical theory and the attending identity politics of the New Wave-focused sci-fi stories and genre analysis for its decline (Santesso, 2014).

The artistic rendering of black bodies, voices, and experiences into places where we were/are ghettoed, excluded, and disappeared is essential to the movement of Afrofuturism and necessary pressure on science fiction. And yet Afrofuturism for the most part has matured outside of what cultural critic Kudwo Eshun calls the "futures industry," the integrated worldview produced by late stage capitalism, global media, and major scientific research. This worldview projects a very specific future that has a strong symbiotic relationship with science fiction, and puts African diasporic communities at the periphery of modern experience while [binding us in a narrative of fractal dystopias](#) (Eshun, 2003).

Black artists, writers, literary scholars, and cultural anthropologist have canonized and refined their own critical pedagogy and tropes upon which Afrofuturism draws inspiration (Womack, 2013) (Nelson, 2002). But it is rare that these texts based on our subjective experience inform

science fiction directly. We are estranged from the so-called genre of estrangement. This leads to, among other things, some very bad science fiction.

Robots were So Far Inferior, They had No Rights which Man was Bound to Respect

As previously stated, Black communities have a special relationship with technology in the Americas. Without putting too fine a point on it, for a time we *were* the technology, legally transformed from human to machine and then partially back again (Kakoudaki, 2014). Robot/slave narratives that do not take this into account are built on shaky ground from the start.

Let's take the 2004 movie *I, Robot* starring Will Smith as case study. An Afrofuturist lens exposes a fistful of glaring problems. Will Smith's character is black and a racist cop (Eshun, 2003) (Kakoudaki, 2014). The Chicago police are portrayed as an unquestionably non-antagonistic yet naïve institution with both advanced firepower and instant access to information. Near future Chicago is still somehow predominantly white. Rebellious robot slaves are the primary antagonistic force. Their rebellion is conflated with a contrived misinterpretation of The Three Laws of Robotics when an upgrade turns slaves into mindless, fascist shock troops bent on regime change. The *good* robots are preemptively destroyed by their more advanced counterparts, because they would obey their Three Laws programming and try to save their human masters.

And while the only thing the movie takes from Asimov is his Three Laws of Robotics (It's closer to the story by Eando Binder than to Asimov's collection by the same name), the Three Laws themselves present their own problems (Kakoudaki, 2014).

The very origins of American pre-Civil War history is built upon the translation of the Three Laws into legal code. The post-Civil War period was White America's politically reactionary and physically violent response to the transgression of these laws. Ostensibly, Asimov's well-written literary realist thought experiment had already been litigated to the highest court of the land.

The reviews for *I, Robot* were mixed. Todd McCarthy from *Variety* put it best: "A failure of imagination." This story was tired well before 2004. Furthermore, it illustrates the pitfalls of putting blackface on science fiction. An integrated Sci-fi/Afrofuturism canon would have provided more intimate and powerful tools [to tell stories that question our shared futures and the dynamics of race and class](#).

Vandermeer, A. a. (2016). *The Big Book of Science Fiction*. Vintage Books.

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Footnotes

- 1: If you want to scare yourself silly, then go to the website linked in the text. You've been warned.
- 2: There in fact were excellent science fiction stories out there that did not fall into the same egoist trap but were not published nearly as widely. What editor-kings decided to publish greatly impacted the imaginations of their audience. Read the Vandermeers' Big Book of Science Fiction to unearth the hidden gems of science fiction history (Vandermeer, 2016)
- 3: Low animals become metaphors for humans when compared to the Utopians, who are greatly admired. "[H]uman beings too warrant extermination if they impede or endanger progress."
- 4: This includes the successive punk-suffixed subgenres, Kim Stanly Robinson's "Three California's Triptych," Callenbach's "Ecotopia" and Ursula K Le Guin's Daoist speculative fiction like "The Dispossessed."
- 5: Solarpunk narratives can also have elements of the fantastic and magical realism.
- 6: Their focus is on stories around ambitious ideas, or moonshots, in advanced technology That is not to say it is not also revolutionary, but their social justice is a byproduct rather than a goal. Of the authors selected, there was only person of color. There are some interesting parallels to the signers of the Ecomodernist Manifesto: <http://www.ecomodernism.org/manifesto-english>.

[Upper Rubber Boot](#) Press has a regular Twitter #Solarpunk Chat run by Deb Merriam that you can use as a model, and they would even be open to your group guiding a monthly conversation.

If I've overlooked or forgotten any creatives, writer, editors, or resources that should be a part of this conversation, please feel free to bring them up in the comments!

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Otto, E. C. (2014). "The Rain Feels New": Ectopian Strategies in the Short Fiction of Paulo Bacigalupi. In E. b. Robinson, *Green Planets: Ecology and Science Fiction* (p. 179).

Prettyman, G. (2014). Daoism, Ecology, and World Reduction in Le Guin's Utopian Fictions. In E. b. Robinson, *Green Planets: Ecology and Science Fiction* (p. 56).

Robinson, G. C. (2014). Afterward: "Still, I'm Reluctant to Call This Pessimism". In E. b. Robinson, *Green Planets: Ecology and Science Fiction* (p. 243).

Santesso, A. (2014). Fascism and Science Fiction. *Science Fiction Studies*, 136-162.

Ulibarri, S. (2017). *Solarpunk: Ecological and Fantastical Stories in a Sustainable World*. In E. b. Lodi-Ribeiro. Albuquerque, New Mexico: World Weaver Press.

Ulibarri, S. (2018). *Glass and Gardens: Solarpunk Summers*. Albuquerque, New Mexico: World Weaver Press.

The ability and willingness to draw upon non-traditional sources beyond standard science fiction becomes another bridge by which we connect to solarpunk.

“The Black Writer Lies in the Guts of Old America, Making Readings about its Future.” (Ishmael Reed)

Reframing the future (we will be there), the present (we already here), and the past (we been here since before the *Mayflower*) is a necessary act of rebellion and historic revisionism that can leg sweep discursive formations supporting the whitewashed mythology of world history and make room for transformation (Nelson, 2002).

Afrofuturism is a means to connect with a living, usable past in contrast to Futurist attempts at a swift and violent break: "The distillation of African diasporic experience, rooted in the past but not weighed down by it, contiguous yet continually transformed" (Nelson, 2002).

Recreating, and rediscovering systems of knowledge are a healing act of discovery. Symbols originated from those hidden histories, indigenous experience, and aboriginal memory [expand the repertoire of fantastical elements](#). This is one way that stories based on Afrofuturist concepts illustrate visions of social justice (Womack, 2013).

Social justice activism has always been in constant dialogue with Afrofuturism. W.E.B. Du Bois's "The Comet" imagines the positive impact a natural disaster might have on race relations. George S. Schuyler's *Black Empire* has striking similarities to [Killmonger's plan for world domination](#) in *Black Panther*. Tananarive is the daughter of activist [Patricia Stephens Due](#) and civil rights lawyer John D. Due Junior. She is not surprised by how many of her students are also activists.

Though she did not self-identify as an Afrofuturist, many of Octavia E. Butler's stories fit into the subgenre, and they inspired [Octavia's Brood](#), a short story anthology that brought together activists and science fiction writers. And here's one for you; [Black Lives Matter even has an Afrofuturist celebration: "Black Futures Matter."](#)

Afrofuturism is partially energized by the shared trauma of people systematically severed from their roots and the perception by many that the Civil Rights movements of the mid-twentieth century had failed. It is the perennial plot problem, Promised Land, and Utopian vanishing point all rolled into one. And yet, I must agree with Tananarive's more hopeful take: Success was never guaranteed within one lifetime but is the work of many.

The arc of history does *not* naturally bend towards justice. Neither does the trajectory of science fiction. Both must be bent. Producing and disseminating Afrofuturist stories and integrating them with sci-fi are integral to that great feat of emotional labor. However, there is no just future built atop (or buried under) the dystopian wreckage of an environment in freefall. Make way for Afro-solarpunk.

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Yaszek, L. (2006). Afrofuturism, Science Fiction, and the History of the Future. *Socialism and Democracy Volume 20*, 41-60.

Footnotes

1: Half-cup evaporated milk, half cup Nutella. Heat and whisk. Add rum (as noted, the good stuff). You're welcome, America.

2: Michael has published Sofia Samatar's "Request for an Extension on the Clarity" (in LCRW 33), Brandon O'Brien's "Papa Bois and the Boy", Innocent Ilo's "To the Place of Skulls", Osahon Ize-Iyamu's "More Sea Than Tar", and Stylo Starr's "Fight or Flight".

3: But honestly, who cares? Read the book. It's excellent.

Below are editors with a long history publishing Black speculative artists and underrepresented voices, and who would be excellent collaborators. All the editors named here are professionals with deep connections with the communities solarpunk is trying to reach:

- *Octavia's Brood* was published by [Validah Imarisha](#) and [Adrienne Maree Brown](#) with AK Press. It was groundbreaking. Social activists and speculative fiction writers came together to write relevant stories. What we need now is **Octavia's Seed**. Taking a page from the [Hieroglyphs project](#) and Ed Finn's Arizona Center for Science and the Imagination (a good resource for experts in solarpunk-friendly scientific fields), authors would collaborate with social activists *and* scientists/engineers.
- Bill Campbell runs [Rosarium Publishing](#) and is responsible for *Mothership*, *Stories for Chip* (edited by Nisi Shawl) and many others.
- [Crossed Genres](#), while not specifically Afrofuturist, brought us *Resist Fascism* (edited by Bart R. Leib and Kay T. Holt), *Long Hidden* edited by Rose Fox and Daniel José Older), and *Hidden Youth* (edited by Mikki Kendall and Chesya Burke). It is Crossed Genres' mission to "give a voice to people often ignored or marginalized in SFF." Of particular interest are their publications on [skilled laborers](#) and [people marginalized throughout history](#).
- World Fantasy Award-winning *FIYAH Literary Magazine* publishes amazing speculative fiction from Black authors around a theme. I'd suggest a collaboration with them that instead engages a specific solarpunk-oriented non-fiction resource. That resource might be a [text](#) or based on a digital symposium with specialists conducted via Facebook, Livestream, etc.

Digital Communities in Conversation: To the Admins of the [Facebook Solarpunk](#)

Digital symposiums and direct outreach is also prescribed for the various communities active on social media. The Facebook Solarpunk community has about 3,000 members. [Black Geeks Society and Nerds of Color has 2,800](#). The State of Black Science Fiction Group has 17,000. [PLANETEJOBN: The Extraordinary Journey of a Black Nerd Group](#) has over 250,000. Many of these members are creatives as well as lovers of speculative fiction (including Fabio Fernandes). [Milton Davis](#), Jermaine Hall, Sheaquann Datts and the other admins are open-minded and adventurous. Collaborating on a shared project could be amazingly productive and would most likely filter out to conversations at the various science fiction conventions around the country, thus reaching even more people.

That We Can Fix...

The communities engaged with the solarpunk movement need to integrate. The solutions I propose are straightforward: coordinated action, organization, and *direct outreach to Afrofuturists*. What follows is a short reference guide and suggestions for specific projects. As you will see, I'm naming names in the interest of connection, outreach, and inspiration:

Let's start with the basics: Ivy Spadille, [Stefani Cox](#), Juliana Goodman, Takim Williams, Milton J Davis, [Nisi Shawl](#), [Tananarive Due](#), Marlon James, [Nicky Drayden](#), [Jennifer Marie Brissett](#), [Phenderson Djéli Clark](#), [Zig Zag Claybourne](#), [Rob Cameron](#) (that's me!), Danny Lore, [Victor Lavalle](#), [Cadwell Turnbull](#), [Terence Taylor](#), [Erin Roberts](#), [Maylon Edwards](#), [Sheree Renée Thomas](#), Essowe Tchalim, [Zin E. Rocklyn](#), [Victor Lavalle](#), and [Kiini Ibura Salaam](#). If you are looking for excellent black speculative arts writers (and an artist: John Ira Jennings) to ask for solarpunk stories, here is a starter list.

Throughout this essay, I have liberally hyperlinked to that I think would be excellent resources such as this post about [Black women engaged in environmental justice](#) or this book of essays on the [Black Anarchists](#). But as with the authors list above, there are more, many more.

Urban Playgrounds

The solarpunk movement's primary focus is wherever people already are; therefore the urban setting is as vital to solarpunk as it is to Black speculative fiction. The city is a fun place to play. For example: Annalee Newitz is the author of "Two Scenarios for the Future of Solar Energy," a [conte philosophic](#) on [biomimetic](#) cities. [Nigerian born architect Olalekan Jeyifous](#) designed architecture for African cities that centralized the needs and knowledge of the poor rather than sweeping them aside. A dialogue between these two creatives would generate whole worlds of urban-focused moonshot stories. What if formally incarcerated [black urban farmers](#) wrested control of legal pot industries back from Monsanto in a Chicago with buildings [that sequestered CO²](#)? If this was a show, I would binge-watch it.

Collaborating Editors and Publications

Moving on to the Solarpunk editors of note: Ed Finn, Kathryn Crammer, Gerson Lodi-Ribeiro, Phoebe Wagner, Brontë Christopher Wieland, Sarena Ulibarri, and Michael DeLuca.

- 4: While the focus here is on narrative patterns, I would be remis not to mention Sun Ra's huge influence on Afrofuturism everything.
- 5: I should say here that of course there are sub or parallel genres such as Afro-surrealism and African futurism. My essay is in no way meant to be definitive in its categorization, but a heuristic to build pathways of collaboration.
- 6: Nisi does soften the blow with author and librarian Jess Nevin's caveat that the race of many anonymous authors published during this time are, as of yet, unknown. I also found George Schuyler's Black Empire (1936-1938) and Leslie F. Stone's "The Fall of Mercury" (1935). Also, many black authors are known to self-publish their stories door to door, out the back of their car, etc. Still, that they are so difficult to find in the Pulp to Golden Age era is the point. The publication of fascism-infused science fiction stories really hit the gas in terms of sheer numbers during this period.
- 7: For further reading, I highly recommend Ann and Jeff VanderMeer's "The Big Book of Science Fiction." The essay on sci-fi history alone is worth its weight in gold.
- 8: "Learning from Other Worlds" by Patrick Parrinder is "a definitive look at the state of science fiction studies today." Published in 2001, there is not a single mention of Afrofuturism in the essays which reference nearly a century's worth of critical analysis.
- 9: This example is taken from visual media instead of the written word, but we can no longer talk about one without referencing the other, especially in regards to the social critique and impact on popular culture.
- 10: This marks the first of two occasions Will Smith has played a racist cop. Please, don't go for the hat trick, Mr. Blockbuster.
- 11: That his racism is directed at robots goes directly to the influence of the futures industry and the metaphor of black bodies as machines, regardless of their approximation of humanness and the uncanny valley.
- 12: This ignores the history of police in the United States, from the present reality back to its inception (which in some cases were specifically designed to suppress the black populations: <https://psmag.com/social-justice/why-black-america-fears-the-police>). Though this should not be a surprise, as there is are strong noir elements to the story—a genre that has been found to be inherently conservative (Santesso, 2014).
- 13: The final boss A.I. is gendered female, VIKI. Analysis of this choice on the part of the filmmakers is beyond the scope of this essay, but...it's certainly an interesting choice.

14: In the original story, the creator of the robots, Dr. Link, desires to create emancipated robots in the hope of staving off an inevitable robot rebellion, which is closer to the actual story arc of the movie.

15: “I Robot” was directed by Alexander Proyas, the same director of the smash blunder that was “Gods of Egypt.” Proyas gets points for bringing us the “The Crow,” but his blind spots are telling.

16: Nalo Hopkinson’s “Ball Lightning” or Octavia Butler’s “Blood Child” (Yaszek, 2006) to name just a couple. Hopkinson’s story even has robots!

17: Take for example Alondra Nelson’s critique of Allucquere Rosanne “Sandy” Stone’s treatment of the self-concept in the “virtual age.” Allucquere was not aware of the trove of experience and scholarly work centered around Du Bois’ double conscious and the realities of fractured consciousness under oppression.

18: Ishmael Reed’s Mumbo Jumbo is an excellent place to start.

19: See Ytasha L. Womack’s discussion of the Dagara with Dr. Malidoma in her book “Afrofuturism” and Yvonne Chireau’s “Black Magic” for history of the American Hoodoo. Also, Pablo Gomez’s “The Experiential Caribbean: Created Knowledge and Healing in the Early Modern Atlantic” (UNC Press, 2017)

[Kim Stanley Robinson](#) calls social justice “survival technology” (Robinson, 2014), and it must be at least as advanced, [exploratory](#), and revolutionary as the renewable energy research that consumes the majority of solarpunk discussion. Here again, Afrofuturism can fill a much-needed gap. Solarpunk creatives don’t need to reinvent the wheel; they need to communicate with the ones who built it the first time.

The Work of Griots

“The writers, the visionaries, those folks who are able to imagine freedom are absolutely necessary to opening up enough space for folks to imagine that there’s a possibility to exist outside of the current system. When we take a small step outside that, we are able to break that indoctrination and see that this is not the only way, and in fact there are as many ways to exist as we can imagine.” —[Walidah Imarisha](#)

Michael DeLuca has been actively looking for Afrosolarpunk stories, and he is certainly not the only one. Yet here we are. There could be many reasons why there are so few of us engaged in solarpunk. It is likely most Afrofuturist creatives haven’t heard about it or haven’t been invited to join in large enough numbers for it to be a thing. That we can fix. But there may be deeper reasons.

I think Walidah Imarisha says it beautifully in the quote above, so I will only add this: that Afrofuturist stories are born from survivors of dystopia. Dystopia [forces painful masks upon us](#). Seeing the world through suffering eyes while trying to [imagine the future can trigger anxiety before triggering hope](#). But Sarena Ulibarri, editor of [Glass and Gardens: Solarpunk Summers](#), reminds us there is much more written *about* solarpunk than there are solarpunk stories being written. That means its identity is still being formed and there is room to grow. Despite its flaws, solarpunk aggregates [mind-bending idea](#) after [mind-bending idea](#) after [mind-bending idea](#), each meant to shatter dystopia with the force of a green tree shoot cracking concrete from the ground up.

The act of creating solarpunk stories can be healing. What you create can be a different [mask](#), one of your own choosing; one made of hope, made of power, and connected to a tradition of griots shaping the future with their dreams. I can wear the mask. *You* can wear the mask. Anyone can wear the mask. [And we won’t be the only ones](#).

The deteriorating state of our biosphere is the product of political decisions and has little to do with a missing-link technological discovery. Michael DeLuca defines solarpunk as “stories of teams of bright young people coming up with solutions to save the planet.” But these cannot just be engineers and scientists. It must include activists, the people on the frontlines of social justice.

It is often assumed that the push to save the ecosystem will come hand in hand with equality for oppressed groups, because both are part of a broad progressive platform. But compromises are made all the time.

[*Solarpunk: Ecological and Fantastical Stories in a Sustainable World*](#) is possibly the first ever solarpunk anthology. It was first published in Brazil in 2012 by [Gerson Lodi-Ribeiro](#), and then translated to English by [Fabio Fernandes](#) and published here by World Weaver Press in 2018. Brazil has been [a world leader in renewable energies](#) for at least a decade but [is anything but a model for economic and racial equality](#). In translator Fabio Fernandes’s words, “[the people] strive to make a living in a shattered economy in every possible way” (Lodi-Ribeiro & Fernandes, 2012, 2018).

Romeu Martins’ story “Breaking News!” slides right up to the edge of dystopia. Told as a quasi-radio drama, we witness a civilian takeover of the *TranCiência* corporate greenhouse and ecological research facility. Then something goes horribly wrong and the civilians, in brutal detail, suddenly slaughter each other. We learn later this was the result of an experimental mind control gas the *TranCiência* purposefully released at the facility—a weapons test (Lodi-Ribeiro & Fernandes, 2012, 2018).

[Madeline Ashby’s](#) “By the Time We Get to Arizona” is found in [Hieroglyphics](#), an anthology of stories based on collaborations between authors and scientists engaged in “[moonshot](#)” research. Ashby’s story is about a Mexican couple trying to gain United States citizenship. They must subject themselves to deeply intrusive data mining and reality show-style 24-hour surveillance in a suburban eco-village on the southern side of the border between Mexico and Arizona. It’s run by a massive solar energy corporation to which the governments have partially outsourced border control. Things seem to be going well for the couple until they get pregnant, which if found out would scuttle their chances at citizenship (Cramer & Finn, 2014).

If solarpunk finds solutions to environmental problems that do not uplift marginalized communities, then we’re just outsourcing suffering to build a New Elysium atop dystopian favelas. [And making use of indigenous peoples’ solutions](#) without considering their needs or their narratives is colonialism in artisanal sheep skin, locally sourced. [As Daniel José Older has said, what we need is “power with rather than power over.”](#)

Part 2: Social Justice is Survival Technology

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<https://www.tor.com/2019/10/30/in-search-of-afro-solarpunk-part-2-social-justice-is-survival-tech-nology/>

The word *futurist* is quite generative. From it we get the arts movement that so influenced science fiction for better and for worse during the Pulp Era, [as discussed in the previous half of this article](#). However, there is another more modern usage: people and organizations in the business of [predicting future trends](#). [In this sense, science fiction is *not* futurist despite claims to the contrary](#). The physics of exactly how Chewie punches the *Millennium Falcon* through [hyperspace](#) is handwaved away, and thirty years after *A New Hope*, hyperdrive technology remains at the edges of pseudo-science. And that’s okay.

The Cave Wall

It is more accurate to say that [science fiction is inspirational](#) at its best, but more fundamentally *projective*; our desires, anxieties, and hopes for our many futures a shadow play on the cave walls behind a snapping fire (Horney, 1991). Even a casual reading of the two subgenres under discussion here, [Afrofuturism](#) and [solarpunk](#), makes this clear.

Afrofuturists rewire temporal and technological spaces to reposition our experiences, centering them. We are quite done playing the fool, monster, or faceless victim. Yet hopeful, healing stories of a better near-future seem forever endangered by old wounds and new.

Solarpunk, on the other hand, recognizes the dire ecological threat of the [Anthropocene](#), yet wishes to oppose a dystopian worldview—to speak friend and enter the 21st Century with revolution in mind for *all* communities. Unfortunately, it has not yet found a solid connection with the underrepresented groups it’s meant to include.

I believe that when combined, the alchemy of these two sub-genres will produce an elixir that is medicinal to Afrofuturism, lifesaving to solarpunk, and healing to all who create in or explore

their shared spaces. In this, part two of my essay, I will discuss why integration is necessary and offer suggestions for how it might come about. But first, let's dig into solarpunk...

Don't Call it Utopia

Many of the published ecological utopian stories of the early 20th century were toxically masculine, anxiety-driven, Eurocentric, and downright lethal. In H.G. Wells' "Men Like Gods" for example, an extraplanetary race of advanced humans, the "Utopians," have achieved worldwide monoculture by refining extermination to [Super Saiyan](#) efficiency, murdering their way to an all-consuming perfection. As one Utopian put it, "Before [us] lies knowledge and we may take, and take, and take, as we grow. These were the good guys in Wells' story (Alt, 2014). Though there is no direct line of succession, subsequent ecological stories were in conversation with the viability of this image of the shining [city upon the hill](#) and, by the time of [Ursula K. Le Guin](#), some authors were pushing back hard against this Utopian mindset: antidote for the toxin, yin to counteract the damage done by the "big yang motorcycle trip" (Prettyman, 2014).

Enter the solarpunk movement.

Peter Frase, author of [Four Futures: Life after Capitalism](#), put it best: "[These stories] demand more of us than simply embracing technology and innovation." They require a perspective that "sees human development as...a process of becoming ever-more attached to and intimate with a panoply of nonhuman natures" (Frase, 2016).

Here is [solarpunk as captured in the words of the creatives](#). Emphasis varies, but there are patterns: optimism, sustainability, social justice, anti-racism. [This has not changed much since the term was coined around 2008](#). The digital solarpunk communities on Medium, [Tumblr](#), [Twitter](#), [Facebook](#), and others agree on and elaborate these points of orthodoxy through conversations around the articles they post and the art they share.

[Michael J. DeLuca](#), publisher of the journal [Reckoning: Creative Writing on Environmental Justice](#), was the solarpunk expert on my Readercon panel "[Afrofuturism and Solarpunk in Dialogue](#)." He is not enamored of the name "solarpunk," because it is possible to overemphasize solar energy as an aesthetic or silver bullet alternative resource. His point is valid. Even focusing just on new sustainable energy production bottlenecks the scope of solarpunk. The dangers posed by climate ~~change~~ ^{destruction} deterioration tasks solarpunk narratives and art to explore and innovate with various fields of harder science to navigate the fire line between ecological recovery and collective immolation.

As author Claudie Arsenault says, "[Solarpunk should work] from existing technologies, from things we already know are possible." This is a powerful throughline in both solarpunk and Afrofuturism. "The distillation of African [and] diasporic experience, rooted in the past but not weighed down by it, contiguous yet continually transformed" (Nelson, 2002). For example, Michael DeLuca and other creatives include [indigenous community](#) farming practices in solarpunk. Not just because these communities may have discovered years ago the answers to some of today's ecological problems, but also because solarpunk's narrative/manifesto (with the provocative exception of the creators behind the Hieroglyphics project) is of a future woven from the experiences of non-dominant peoples.

But all is not well in Digital Solarpunklandia.

Despite diverse admins, you have to scroll pretty deep into the membership before you count more than ten black faces in these platforms and communities. The Facebook group actually has a breakaway called "Solarpunk But With Less Racism." And while, relative to mainstream sci-fi, people of color are overrepresented as main characters in solarpunk, the majority of authors who write them are not. It is difficult to see how this explicitly anti-racist movement can develop without direct engagement with those whose collective recent experience involves pulling themselves off the pointy end of Western utopic aspirations. The solarpunk anti-racist mission is in grave danger otherwise, and there are real-world consequences.

During my Readercon panel, author [Cadwell Turnbull](#) asked who owned the technology shaping the future. In 2013 intellectual property made up ninety percent of European exports, much of which flooded into Africa. Africa had become the next frontier for property developers and architectural consultancies running out of work in the Global North. Green lingo like "Smart-cities" or "Eco-cities" were used to sell city plans that did not take into account the actual needs of the communities and resulted in "ghost cities" that few can afford to live in: surface-level solarpunk aesthetic, but a sun-bleached shell of its true purpose (Frase, 2016) (Watson V. , 2012).

If the "solar" stands for hope, then the "[punk](#)" part of the equation is the kernel of open source programming that maintains the genre's anti-racist, pro-social justice drive, despite the inherent pressures of the (mostly affluent, White, English-speaking) community in which it was created. For solarpunk to grow into what it truly wants to be, it needs Afrofuturism.

Social Justice as Survival Technology