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Author

Faichney, Sylvia

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Considering Afrofuturism and the Built Environment

a response by Sylvia Faichney

As Angela Pastorelli-Sosa demonstrates in her essay on artist Sydney Cain in this volume, Afrofuturism centers Blackness and Black experiences while sharpening the contours of our imaginations by bridging different temporal planes. Pastorelli-Sosa indicates that Afrofuturism is a powerful tool for an artist's imagination, and is used to wade into the possibilities of multiple futures and pasts. She artfully demonstrates this feature of Afrofuturism by highlighting how Cain's spiritual labor allows for new experiences and engagements with the present and the past. Through the process of material extraction, Cain's drawings become a channel for ancestral intervention. They pull an "invisibilized" people from the past, allowing them to surface in a present landscape, thereby altering our understanding and relationship with space and time. Like Cain's sensitivity to ancestral guidance, Pastorelli-Sosa dutifully notes the scholarly and artistic lineage of Afrofuturism by connecting Cain's work with authors and artists such as Drexciya, Saidiya Hartman, and Octavia Butler; their appearances act as anchors dropped in rough waters, steadying us while we are transported into the possibilities of new planes opened through the wake. Pastorelli-Sosa's inclusion of these artists and scholars, specifically Butler, inspired me to think through Afrofuturism and how it engages with the built environment. Using Butler as a point of departure, I consider the pluralities of navigating through space and time, as well as the imaginative structures of Walter J. Hood in the recent MoMA exhibition *Reconstructions: Architecture and Blackness in America* (2021), highlighting Afrofuturism's role in inspiring future spaces and possibilities.

Afrofuturism frequently challenges predominant understandings of how space and time are experienced. Past and present spill over into one another, and that spillage expands the possibilities of experiencing or understanding the built environment. Cain's drawing *Turk and Fillmore* (2018) illustrates this feature through the appearance of ancestors in the plane of the present. Similarly, Butler's novel *Kindred* (1979) engages with this quality in two distinct ways. Firstly, Butler highlights this spillage of past and present with the narrator Dana, who is a Black woman time traveling from her home in Los Angeles in 1976 to a plantation where her ancestors live in the antebellum South in the 1800s. Secondly, Butler showcases how enslaved people experienced time and space, thus opening new paths of seeing and methods of understanding the built environment. In *Kindred*, Dana is pulled to the plantation multiple times at inconsistent intervals. During one of her longer trips, she runs away at the same time as Alice, her enslaved great-great Grandmother. After being captured, Dana laments: "We'd both run and been brought back, she in days, I in only hours. I probably knew more than she did about the general layout of the Eastern Shore. She knew only the area she'd been born and raised in, and she couldn't read a map. I knew about towns and rivers miles away—and it hadn't done me a damned bit of good!"¹ Dana's reliance on conventional ways of seeing and navigating the built environment stifled the possibility of liberation. Here, Butler complicates our understanding of the built environment not only through illustrating how past, present, and future spill into each other through time travel, but also through a more mundane method of navigation.

Likewise, Rebecca Ginsburg's article "Freedom and the Slave Landscape" provides a critical historical analysis as to why relying on conventional maps and ways of seeing the built environment may have brought Dana back to the plantation before Alice. The overarching question in Ginsburg's article is how enslaved Black people escaped to freedom, and she notes that in most cases, it was through the geographic network of the slave landscape, and without the paternalistic oversight of whites.² The slave landscape included secret paths and places, rivers, and the unmanaged surrounding woods of the plantation, all of which opened a space not bound to the plantation owner's sight, and thus, total control.³ Ginsburg articulates how conventional maps do not include geographic networks of enslaved peoples' cognitive mapping, nor do they illustrate how they experienced the built environment.⁴ Enslaved peoples' experiences of the environment was by no means singular, and Ginsburg

¹ Octavia E. Butler, *Kindred* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2003), 177.

² *Ibid.*, 37.

³ *Ibid.*, 41.

⁴ Rebecca Ginsburg, "Freedom and the Slave Landscape," *Landscape Journal* 26, no. 1 (2007): 37-8.

underlines how their “environmental cognition” of space varied greatly. This initial understanding of the various ways of seeing and experiencing emphasizes how conventional maps—no matter how well drawn or memorized—do not imagine the myriad of pathways one can move within or use as a means to navigate the built environment.⁵

While linking Ginsburg’s analysis of the slave landscape to Butler’s *Kindred* draws out how Afrofuturism breaks open ways of engaging with space and time within historical discourse, the 2021 MoMA exhibition *Reconstructions: Architecture and Blackness in America* details how Afrofuturism can inspire future worlds and possibilities. Curators Mabel O. Wilson and Sean Anderson, along with assistant curator Arièle Dionne-Krosnick, invited designers, artists, and architects to imagine new ways of creating, being, and seeing the built environment. Each project emphasized the historical role of the built environment as a “mechanism” that denied agency to communities, thereby operating as a medium of hostility and social repression, such as the plantations owners’ landscape did.⁶ Architect Walter J. Hood’s project *Black Power/Black Towers* exemplifies how the exhibition wove the past with the future, thus resulting in imaginative structures that are responsive to past and present conditions. Hood’s installation, plans, and drawings reimaged what a street might look like in West Oakland if it centered the needs of the surrounding Black community, who have been underserved, especially when compared to wealthier neighboring cities. His imaginative structures function as building blocks for brighter futures while formally and conceptually referencing the past. Formally, these buildings reference machinery patented by Black inventors. Conceptually, Wood takes inspiration from the legacy of the Black Panther’s ten-point program—education, employment, housing, to name a few—to determine the function of the building. In Hood’s imagined cityscape, a community that has historically and systematically been underserved has access to resources such as education and employment, giving room for them to thrive, projecting them into a dynamic and vibrant future.

Pastorelli-Sosa highlights Afrofuturism’s ability to showcase the imaginative benefits of sensitivity to the lineage of an inherited past. As these scholars, writers, and artists have emphasized, imagination is not some unbounded, sanitized fantasy. It is a powerful tool of desire bound to past and present cultural, social, and political conditions. Being sensitive to this shared past while following the desire to imagine new conditions of being and understanding opens possibilities for readers, viewers, and communities to unlock new planes of space and time.

⁵ Ibid., 37.

⁶ Sean Anderson and Mabel Wilson, “Introduction,” in *Reconstructions: Architecture and Blackness in America*, ed. Sean Anderson and Mabel Wilson (New York, NY: The Museum of Modern Art, 2021), 16.

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