



# AFROFUTURISM

The tool of reclamation for the African diaspora

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**FOR THE PAST 21 YEARS**, my experience as an Afro-Canadian has been one of neglect. I know this is partially because of my upbringing, but it's also part of a bigger issue faced by the people of African diaspora who don't know about their own culture and history.

A few years ago I started my journey of learning about a piece of my identity that I had never really embraced. As a Sudanese woman and a black Canadian, I'm still learning about what my people have done, and what they continue to achieve. This knowledge has given me the power to really envision my future potential, something that Afrofuturism strives for.

Afrofuturism was coined by cultural critic Mark

Dery in the early 1990s to describe the intersection between technology, speculative work and African culture. The early definition was an umbrella term for artwork that used African history and technology to position black people in the future. Afrofuturism covers a wide range of media including literature, film, design, dance, visual art and music.

It was later in 2015 that Afrofuturism 2.0 was introduced by Charles E. Jones and Dr. Reynaldo Anderson, co-founder of the Black Speculative Arts Movement (BSAM). Afrofuturism 2.0 is based on the idea of Pan-Africanism, an ideology that seeks to unify Africans both outside of and within the continent of Africa. The new wave of Afrofuturism sees a distancing from the aesthetics of the first, and really tries to drill down the theoretical, teachable framework.

"The first definition [of Afrofuturism] was from a white person's perspective as a response to oppression," says Quentin VerCetty, co-founder of the Canadian chapter of BSAM. "Whereas Afrofuturism 2.0 says this is a future *despite* our oppression."

The Canadian Afrofuturism scene, particularly in Toronto, isn't very well known. I had a hard time



finding Canadian Afrofuturist writers, aside from Nalo Hopkinson who wrote the very popular *Brown Girl in the Ring*. Eventually, I came across Terese Pierre. She writes poetry and works as a poetry editor for a speculative literary publication, *Augur Magazine*.

Speaking to Pierre was very eye-opening. I saw a lot of myself in her. She was raised in Canada and didn't visit her home country of Grenada, a small island in the Caribbean, very often. This meant she wasn't very familiar with its history and traditions.

Pierre operates a lot in the speculative realm of poetry, which is akin to Afrofuturism. Speculative art is just that: a speculation of the future. It is fantastical, and in terms of Afrofuturism, it is based commonly in African and Caribbean myth and folklore.

Because of its roots in fantasy, a common misconception is that the stories and symbolism in Afrofuturism aren't real or achievable. But Queen Kukoyi, the co-director at BSAM and Afrofuturist artist, says this isn't the case.

"In this reclaiming, we can begin to build and invest in the continent too, which in turn invests in ourselves

and decolonizes this idea of what blackness is," she says. "We get to define it for ourselves now."

VerCetty says the speculative work helps those who have never visited Africa connect to the continent. "The speculative aspect is where you start to imagine a

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Quinten VerCetty's, Dance for her Pride

future that is informed by an African past.”

There was never a time when I genuinely, wholeheartedly could call myself Sudanese. I could say it as an automatic response to ‘where are you from?’ but it never meant something to me. I’ve lived in many neighbourhoods in Toronto and have met a lot of people. Living among so many different cultures, I melted into whoever I was surrounded by. Diversity was evident wherever I was, but I wasn’t really *home*. I didn’t grow up around Sudanese people, African people or black people for that matter. So, my sense of self was pretty distorted.

To make things worse, I really believed in the stereotypes of Africa being a place that needed help. Poor, underdeveloped and in need of saving. I gave no credit to my own people.

It wasn’t until I did my own research that I uncovered so much more about Sudan, which revealed a part of my African heritage I knew nothing about. And from my growing curiosity, my love for my own people grew as well. Our ancestors were Nubian royalty. They were warriors. They were innovators.

They were a people to be proud of!

My research into Sudan eventually led to me discovering fiction novels written by and about Sudanese people. I discovered the works of Leila Aboulela, an Egyptian born and Scottish residing Sudanese novelist whose stories focus on the intersecting lives of westernized Sudanese women and their search for their own identity. I had never related to literature so much in my life. Aboulela was able to paint a picture of a Sudan from the past that I had never known: a Sudan that was shockingly free, civilized and downright powerful. She opened my eyes and I began seeing Sudan and Africa in a new light.

The same diversity that made me feel isolated growing up is also the same diversity VerCetty says will provide an interesting layer to Afrofuturism in Canada. “Everyone has their own different idea based on their own culture or ethnic background on what they think the future will be like.”

VerCetty thinks that Afrofuturism in Canada, and in general, still has a long way to go. “The tipping point hasn’t happened yet because people are still learning

about Afrofuturism,” he says. “People haven’t yet stumbled on Afrofuturism 2.0.” With the momentum it has now, VerCetty believes the third wave is when it will reach the forefront of black people and really become a way of life.

As I contemplate my future as a Sudanese woman in Toronto, I think about Afrofuturism. When I first heard the term used long ago, I thought it was just science fiction, something that wasn’t real. But now, I’ve learned that it’s a way of life. It’s a functional tool for black people to understand they may live elsewhere but their roots lie in Africa. Black people are innovators, we are change makers and we are most definitely the future.

I think Kukoyi summed it up perfectly when she told me, “Whether you like it or not, Afrofuturism is here to stay and it’s going to be integrated into the lives of black folks.”

Learning about my origins and history of my people

has instilled in me a confidence and surety I never knew I needed. I’m still learning every day about the achievements by Sudanese and Africans and what they continue to do to push the boundaries. ▲

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