

Brazilian Afrofuturism, Heuristic Function, and the Mass Cultural Genre System



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Some people ask why Afrofuturism is so big in Brazil, but a better inquiry would peer into what made the country so receptive to this peculiar intersection of science fictionality and social movement. Perhaps it's because Afrofuturism, while being big enough to become its own genre, can operate within but also well beyond such boundaries as genres and borders. Isiah Lavender III calls it “a narrative practice that enables users to communicate the interconnection between science, technology, and race across centuries, continents, and cultures” (Lavender III 2). Either way, as we cast our two cents into this discussion by the very act of naming it out, Brazilian Afrofuturism continues generating a treasure trove of cultural objects and political-aesthetic ecologies that hint of a deeper history.

This essay¹ engages the movement's emergence in the country through its precursors and contributing factors, including the multigenerational efforts of cultures of resistance and affirmative action policies. We will discuss the strategies at play in Afrofuturist practices and why they feed on the mass cultural genre system's own affordances. The intersection of affordances and activism exercises what we call the heuristic function of science fiction (SF) by making it a potentially generative site of problem-solving and innovation.

Competing Myth-Makings

The myth of racial democracy was used by the Brazilian state to discourage any problematization of racism and to foster conformity. There's even a “Monument to the three races” in Goiás' state capital, Goiânia, representing the myth put to use for the purposes of nation building. A more faithful portrait is the 1895 painting *A Redenção de Cam* [*The Redemption of Cam*] by Modesto Brocos,² where three generations strive toward the goal of whitening the nation-state: the Black grandmother, the lighter-skinned daughter, and the even lighter-skinned grandchild. The myth encouraged national unity even as government policy fostered the immigration of Europeans and today, despite some recent advances, TV programming remains dominated by white actors. In Mozambique³ in early 2015, for instance, a local subsidiary of a Brazilian media group broadcast the country's racially skewed soap operas interspersed by ads that reflected the overwhelmingly Black ethnicity of the country, showing how racism can be exported as supposedly harmless entertainment.

But in the Brazilian Afrofuturist case, what was also being imported was the activist stance that produced the Civil Rights movement in the USA, thanks to intercultural dialogue between activists and academics in both countries. The movement also expanded to Brazil in the last

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decade thanks to affirmative action policies that increased university enrollment of Black students (Vieira and Arends-Kuenning), broadening the potential audience for SF works, as well as declines in the marginal cost of communication and computing, all of which made it easier to organize, debate issues, and disseminate. The mainstreaming of Afrofuturism played an important role: several activists say the release of the movie *Black Panther* (2018) was an inspirational turning point. Also, much activism went into getting affirmative action laws passed in Congress, priming an entire generation to call out social hypocrisies but also understand there can be a different relationship with technology and knowledge.



The Redemption of Cam, Modesto Brocos, 1895.
Museu Brasileiro de Belas Artes, Rio de Janeiro.

Afrofuturism today is clearly helping improve the self-esteem of Black Brazilians through the instrumentalization of temporal and utopian thinking at the service of decolonial goals (Brock 2023) that encourage resistance and survival. On the 8th and 9th of April, 2021, as the death toll from the Covid-19 pandemic approached 4,000 a day in Brazil, cultural association Ilê Aiyê (which, since 1974, has been empowering Black culture in the street carnival of Salvador, the Brazilian city at the heart of African culture in the country), held an Afrofuturist online event with experts and scholars focused on how to use this powerful, global cultural movement, as well as the musical heritage of Afro-Brazilians, to build a better future for their community.⁴ Local activists are also using this same toolkit of creativity and optimism to foster technological inclusion, socially sensitive entrepreneurship, and self-education, holding annual events including a large edition⁵ on November 18-19, 2022.

Afrofuturism prospered in Brazil because it found an already vigorous and decades-long base of activism through art and education that was in strong dialogue with American social

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movements and academia. The most prominent of these foundational activists was Abdias do Nascimento (1914-2011), a writer, poet, and legislator who started contesting Brazil's myth of a racial democracy as early as the 1940s. Abdias fought back by focusing on writing and staging plays, as well as educating the members of his movement, called quilombismo after the communities of escaped slaves. After Brazil's return to democracy, Abdias was elected for Congress and helped push for affirmative action laws. Two of his paintings⁶ insert Afro-Brazilian religious icons into both the Brazilian and US flags, anticipating the later techniques of Afrofuturism, of appropriating the tropes, techniques, and imaginaries of SF to challenge Eurocentric representations. The paintings were made while Abdias was exiled by the Brazilian dictatorship, working as visiting professor in several American universities and engaged with the Pan-African movement. By juxtaposing Afro-Brazilian religious icons—the bow of *Oxóssi*, the deity of hunting and nature, and the axe of *Xangô*, the deity of fire and justice—with two tools of nationalist imaginaries, Abdias reverse engineers them to show his awareness of the power of these tools and his preoccupation with upholding a place for Black Brazilians in them. Today the Brazilian Afrofuturist offshoot has a host of writers, composers, theorists and filmmakers laying deep roots unparalleled by any other country in Latin America: a group of Central Americans and Caribbeans have gone with Prietopunk (Medina) to describe their efforts and complain about excessive Americanization in Afrofuturism, perhaps due to having suffered even more acutely from American interventionism while lacking the same dialogue.



Okê Oxóssi (1970),
Museu de Arte de São Paulo.



Xangô sobre (1970),
Acervo Ipeafro, Rio de Janeiro.

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Inspired by the Black Speculative Arts Movement (BSAM) in the USA, Zaika dos Santos and her collaborators have formed a Brazilian chapter with over 150 members all over the country, grouped under such themes as visual arts, literature, music, research, technology, and fashion (Moniz). The collective promotes meetings, courses, livestreams, workshops, and other activities. In 2022, as a part of Carnegie Hall's Afrofuturist Festival, BSAM Brasil released nearly eight hours of presentations by its members,⁷ offering a good measure of the movement's popularity in the country.

The eminently musical side of Afrofuturism would also have to find its expression in the strongly musical culture of Brazil. In the later stages of her career, samba star Elza Soares (1930-2022) connected to the movement by working with young composers and creators to give the classics of Brazil's musical genre an Afrofuturist reading, like *Juízo Final* [Final Judgement] by Nelson Cavaquinho.⁸ Nelson was part of an earlier generation of popular composers of sambas from humble origins and this song, released at the height of the repressive Brazilian military dictatorship in 1973, speaks of hope and justice defeating evil. With a video clip inspired by technoculture but which argues for the same integration between nature and humankind backed by other works of Brazilian Afrofuturism and SF, Elza repurposes the powerful idea of Nelson as the threat of repressive authoritarianism again starts looming large over Brazil (Pearson).

This essay offers only a glimpse at the hundreds of Afrofuturist books published in Brazil since the 1970s. An earlier example is *A Mulher de Aleduma* [*The Woman of Aleduma*, 1985] by Aline França, which explores the interplanetary creation myth of the residents of an isolated island in a developing country. The descendants of the alien race are disturbed by the appearance of a "big-town" man who embodies the predatory nature of colonialism and white modernity, with his plans to build a resort and factory on the island. He later rapes and impregnates the novel's female protagonist. The collapse of telepathic connection to their home planet further plagues the community, which will have to regenerate and resist following a long period of blissful isolation. The most popular author of the new generation is Alê Santos, whose work is being turned into a movie and game. Meanwhile, Sandra Menezes, with her *Céu entre Mundos* [*The Sky Between Worlds*, 2021], which depicts a Black civilization starting over in a new planet, was a finalist for Brazil's most prestigious literary award, the Jabuti.

Also of note are the three novels so far of Fabio Kabral's Ketu Três universe, all of them fast-paced and emotionally dense narratives dealing with trauma and reconnecting with ancestors and ancestral knowledge, while serving up a fair share of intrigue. Kabral de-centers knowledge by emphasizing African culture. His worldbuilding depicts a technology that does not stand in opposition to nature but complements and respects it; where science and magic aren't mutually exclusive but coeval; and the fluidity of gender identities is normalized. At one point he decided to break⁹ with the Afrofuturist label, revealing a keen awareness of the downside of such collective boundaries on creative expression. He then turned to the creation of a new conceptual genre called macumbapunk¹⁰—*macumba* is the informal name of the Afro-Brazilian religion in Brazil—combining fantasy, SF, and African cultural elements. This process of genre genesis (Brock 2022)

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is part of the political ecology of boundary negotiations involved in the creation of collective meaning within the mass-cultural genre.

Lu Ain-Zaila, an educator from the Baixada Fluminense suburb of Rio de Janeiro, is another important writer of the movement. She works on using Afrofuturism as an educational tool and illustrates and self-publishes her books on platform sites like Amazon, but also through small publishers like São Paulo-based Kitembo Edições Literárias do Futuro, Magh, and Monomito Editorial. As with Abdias, her ideas indicate a preoccupation with nation-building and centering Afro-Brazilians and their culture in the process. Her duology *Brasil 2408 – (In) Verdades and (R) Evolução* (2016 and 2017), uses a multifaceted patchwork of imaginary news reports, didactic materials from the future, first-person points of view, SF, political thriller, and police procedural to propose social technologies aimed at dealing with the destruction caused by a climate catastrophe in the 23rd century, constituting a vibrant example of an organically creative mind exploring the narrative possibilities of the movement. Like Kabral, she too has ventured into genre genesis territory by calling her work “cyberfunk.”

The short film *Abian* (2021, 32’), produced and released in Salvador by a younger generation of creators, showcases the increasingly sophisticated artistry of Brazilian Afrofuturism. Created by Mayara Ferrão, Diego Alcantara, and Filipe Mimoso with 360-degree video technology,¹¹ it works almost like an art installation, combining well produced imagery, special effects, and monologue into a *bildungsroman* of one apprentice of Candomblé. It opens with an astronaut floating through space after being ejected from a brilliant portal that closes after him, deploying major signposts of SF’s phenomenological wonder, while the competing videos within the screen create a sense of dislocation but also of multiplicity of viewpoints.



Abian (2021). YouTube screenshot.

Three other Afrofuturist films from the last decade, meanwhile, propose collective action and real-world mobilization in order to counter authoritarianism, alongside community solidarity to

oppose oppression. First, there's *Branco sai, Preto fica* ([*White out, Black in*] 1h33', 2014), which has charmed global audiences with its remarkable fusion of reality, fiction, and community action. During local meetings to discuss cinema, culture, and local problems, residents of the impoverished Federal District village of Ceilândia decided to portray a real-life police massacre in the late 1980s. Using two survivors and blending their testimony with a science-fictional narrative about a future Brazil sending a time travelling agent to investigate the massacre, Adirley and the community employed the Afrofuturist kit of genre infrastructure, speculation, and temporality to expose Brasília's failed utopia (Beal 113). *Negrum3* ([*Blackn3ss*], 22', 2018), directed by Diego Paulino and produced by Victor Casé, takes a somewhat similar approach with a short documentary about the lives of queer and trans Afro-Brazilians in the megalopolis of São Paulo. It focuses on their traumas but also their strategies of survival and shows a clear inspiration from the Afrofuturism of Sun Ra (1914-1993), closing with a detailed scene where a trans performer descends from a stylized flying saucer.

Also of note is *Medida Provisória* ([*Executive Order*], 1h43', 2021), directed by Lázaro Ramos based on the acclaimed play *Namíbia Não* [*Not Namíbia*] by Aldri Anunciação, himself the son of a well-respected Black union leader and politician in Bahia. It imagines a dystopian present where a far-right government offers to send Afro-Brazilians back to Africa as reparation for racism. Later, officials begin deporting holdovers. The plot's dystopian turn resembles the recent wave of far-right politics taking over Brazil following a decade of progressive governments, with hate speech echoed by conservative media and a powerful but amorphous mass of influencers. The hopes of the resistance are a series of "afrobunkers" where people seek refuge to reorganize and resist. Following a run in the international festival circuit during 2021, the film finally was released in Brazil in 2022 to good reviews and large audiences.

Breaking Boundaries

We imagine things to both materialize them and maintain their materiality. But imagination also has its "tenses," as famously defined by Raymond Williams in the essay *Utopia and Science Fiction* (1978). Works like Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Dispossessed* are "open utopias" insofar as they are imperfect but still offer pathways where temporalities become denser and more fluid, teaching a form of problem solving that can reopen possibilities. Williams sought to explain this combination of hope and determination as akin to an impulse "which now warily, self-questioningly, and setting its own limits, renews itself" (Milner 95). SF can fulfill this heuristic function through the imagination of innovation and alterity, by working in the liminal space between the mass-cultural market and community practices, supported by three socially generative elements of SF as part of the mass-cultural genre system:

Temporality—SF often deals with the density of time, either by depicting far-off or near futures, time travel, uchronias (alternative presents) or multiple, interlaced temporalities. If we agree that temporality is a contested space, "something that always eludes complete co-optation by capital, something on a different categorical or ontological level leading to multiple fractures

and sites of resistance” (Burges and Elias 12), it can be a fertile ground to challenge narratives that uphold a linear trajectory of time, or which seek to erase the wrongs of the past. Afrofuturists, for instance, struggle so that the past may seep into the present and the future, giving time a stickiness that demands more complex understandings; time itself is a common language whose synchronization carries mobilization potential.

Speculation—Speculation is a mental state (Kind) that serves here as a generous umbrella term for the intersection of SF’s affective investment in technoscientific and temporal thinking. Psychologists consider speculative thinking a way to reflect about what could happen and make decisions based on a series of mental processes and calculations informed by our knowledge (Glăveanu 87, 94-95). We see it is one of the central affordances of the mass-cultural genre, mediating our entanglement with technology, science, and the world’s knowledge hierarchies and their scientific paradigms, highly complex technical systems, and often competing cosmologies. Speculation is both about filling in the spaces of our socially cognitive processes (future imaginaries, for instance), but also a contemporary mode of operating in markets and governments attempting to predict and direct the future.

Genre infrastructure— John Rieder proposed in 2017 that SF is a mass cultural genre supported by boundary objects, a concept he borrowed from science and technology studies to explain the dynamics of negotiated meaning at play. Boundary work in SF communities has similarities to how science and technology are negotiated and accepted through sociotechnical imaginaries, which are collective ways of thinking. These boundary objects are “plastic enough to adapt to local needs and constraints of the several parties employing them, yet robust enough to maintain a common identity across sites” (Star 1999, 2010). This also describes the pliable yet solid character of SF and how it provides shared spaces of contestation and collective engagement. Maintaining and cultivating these shared spaces often is up to a care economy of community work. People embedded in these knowledge systems intervene in them according to their political aims, becoming part of the “genre infrastructure” that creates emergent spaces for an organizational ecology operating with a distributed leadership model, as has been proposed recently as a tool and paradigm for progressive activists (Routledge 2017, Nunes 2021). This concept expands the paratextual focus (Määttä 115) to how community members consciously leave what Star called “trace records” of their interventions into how the genre is constructed.

By toying with how we imagine such elements as temporalities, technology, and alterity using elements from a globally recognized genre, Afrofuturists seek agency over the representation of the future and its construction. The way cognition (Hutchins) and particularly art (Gell 220-237) are socially distributed allows Afrofuturism to operate as a political-aesthetic subjectivity intervening not only in the technoculture of SF but the West’s failure to conceive of different futures. These efforts gradually grow in popularity until they have effects on the real world, we argue. Indeed, enough people have become mobilized by these subjectivities in Brazil to form communities merging the widely disseminated visual and narrative repertoires of SF with the social and political networks honed by their activist predecessors. Imagination, optimism,

creativity, contestation, and curiosity are the watchwords of these socially conscious creators hacking the machinery of the genre to enact change in the present and lay the groundwork for opening up the future.

Notes

1. This result is part of a project that has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (grant agreement No. 852190, CoFutures).
2. <https://enciclopedia.itaucultural.org.br/obra3281/a-redencao-de-cam>
3. <https://memoria.ebc.com.br/agenciabrasil/noticia/2012-04-17/novelas-brasileiras-passam-imagem-de-pais-branco-critica-escritora-mocambicana>
4. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qjdy0jtDoDY&ab_channel=Il%C3%AAAi%C3%AA
5. <https://afrofuturismo.com.br/>
6. *Okê Oxóssi* (1970, acrylic on canvas, 92 × 61 cm): <https://masp.org.br/index.php/acervo/obra/oke-oxossi>
Xangô sobre (1970, acrylic on canvas, 91 × 61 cm): <https://masp.org.br/livros/abdias-nascimento-um-artista-panamefricano-a-panamefricano-artista-capas-shango-takes-over-241>
7. <https://www.youtube.com/@bsambrasil6716/streams>
8. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VBU5MYaDKjo&ab_channel=ElzaSoares
9. https://twitter.com/Ka_Bral/status/1376174021788729354?s=20
10. Kabral, Fabio. 2020. <https://fabiokabral.wordpress.com/2020/06/16/macumbapunkuma-nova-proposta-de-ficcao-especulativa/> Accessed on 06 May 2023.
11. https://youtu.be/0SH_TTcfzmM

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