## BLACK SPACE AND BRANDING THE AFROFUTURE:

# THE RIPPLING EFFECT OF SCHAFFER LIBRARY'S AFROFUTURIST EXHIBITIONS

AFR@FUTURISM | FILM SERIES



'I have heard of Octavia Butle Child' in my PHL 297 course. K. Scheiter, faculty

the library showing African-Americans on the walls and in t exhibit cases ." K. Ijang, '17

"The depiction of black slaves as "cyborgs" and the idea that "race" is a technology never occurred to me . It's a new, critical way of looking at slavery that I never considered." D. McFarlane, '19

"I liked the space themes and spaceships. It makes me want to listen to more Afrofuturist music and see the movies. It made me wonder why more black people aren't shown in the future ." STEP student exhibit visitor

Leveraging the library space to help realize the college's goals of diversity, the Access Services Librarian and the Director and Curator of Art Collections and Exhibitions sought to address the lack of racial/ethnic representation on campus through a multimedia exhibit and art installation that brought our diverse collections to the forefront. The exhibit Black Space: Reading (and writing) Ourselves into the Future highlighted our library's speculative book, film and music collections, while the art installation Branding the Afrofuture featured political and celebratory digital print collages with graffiti wall drawings to present black cultural production through an Afrofuturist lens. We used AfroFuturism as a powerful, intentional mechanism to place black/brown images and traditionally marginalized perspectives at the center. These exhibitions established a place for students of color to be part of the narrative in a PWI and offered interpretive tools whereby black intellectual and cultural production could take center stage for academic engagement.

#### **An Afrofuturist Collaboration**

Selecting art work that spoke to those communities that might not see themselves represented on campus was key to the selection of an exhibit theme. Schaffer Library was intentional in the selection of AfroFuturism as the theme for this exhibition. It was a topic that had the potential to touch on politics, culture, and notions of power especially at a PWI. An academic library's mission is to make superlative resources accessible to its users, but Schaffer is also a teaching library. It is committed to information literacy instruction, to challenging prevailing notions of the dominant culture, and in this case, to normalizing images not typically represented at PWIs. Once an institution that excluded people of color, we assumed the role of occupiers and "took over" the library with an AfroFuturist theme to deliver an important message to library users and to the wider community. By presenting black intellectual and cultural production we wanted to articulate our [the library's commitment to - what is - the essence of Afrofuturist thought: namely that, black people, once excluded, are now a vital part of this intellectual and creative community and they will be a vital part of the future at Union.

### Integration into the College Curriculum

The overwhelming success of these exhibits was in part due to the partnership that we developed with teaching faculty. AfroFuturist content was integrated into eleven courses that were taught over the period of three terms. Students in these classes read AfroFuturist content featured in the exhibit, were assigned response papers about exhibit themes and issues, and were encouraged to attend exhibit ancillary events. We were invited to deliver lectures about exhibit themes and asked to conduct exhibit tours for several classes. During the 2017-18 school year, two students were inspired to write their senior theses on AfroFuturism while the exhibits were still up. Two years later, the exhibitions are still inspiring students. Another senior thesis on AfroFuturism was submitted this term along with a creative fiction piece.

We sought these collaborations with faculty with the intention to reach a variety disciplines in an effort to engage as many students as possible. We hoped to reach students who might not otherwise be exposed to images and literature with an AfroFuturist lens in addition to creating the more inclusive space for black students and other students of color. The overall effect insisted that people of color have a place in the library, in predominately white classrooms, and at Union. Classes varied widely, such as What is the Avant-Garde?, Sociology of Black Women's Culture, Art & the State, and Technology and its Discontents, all embedded parts of the exhibitions in their curriculum. Afrofuturism remains fully embedded in several classes and we are confident this will continue in the future.

As the fifth art installation series hosted in the library, Robinson's exhibition was by far the most successful, in terms of student engagement and interest, as well as enjoyment by the public at large. This could be seen during his artist talk, attended by over 70 visitors, including a large contingent of students and community members. Visitors from the Schenectady community, not often seen on campus, felt welcome in the library Learning Commons.

### Conclusion

As a result of the great success enjoyed by our concurrently programed exhibitions in the library, our biggest take away was to use the Afrofuturist exhibitions as a model for future collaborations. During winter and spring term 2019, and winter term 2020, we will use a similar template to focus on Latinx/Latinidad cultures, with student produced "Zines" featured in the library Lally Read Room exhibit space, the sixth Art Installation Series featuring first generation Peruvian-American. LGTBQ artist, Juan Hinojosa, in addition to the Mandeville Gallery exhibition focusing on Latinx artists. We anticipate teaching faculty will use this concentrated effort to delve deeply into the cultural production of artists of Latin descent, residing in both Latin America and the United States, in much the same way as that of the Afrofuture exhibitions.



National and International Library and Information Issues (forthcoming)

Poster Session: Association of College and Research Libraries Conference

Diversity in Research and Practice Conference, Teachers College at Columbia University





Anger, Revenge & Forgiveness Art & the State Comics & Politics Intro to Africana Studies Intro to Philosophy Intro to Sociology Intro to the Study of Literature: Fiction Nature & Environmental Writing Painting I Political Sociology: #Black Lives Matter Political Theory

Race, Politics & Diaspora Social Identities & Science in the Genomic Age Presentation: Sociology of the Black Religious Experience Sociology of Black Women's Culture Sociology of the Black Community Transnational Literature & Theory What is the Avant-Garde?

4 senior thesis to date

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## COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS

Hamilton Hill Arts Center

Kappa Alpha Psi Brothers

**Kenney Community Center** 

Science Technology Enrichment Program: Union College: 7–12<sup>th</sup> graders

Oneida Middle School, Schenectady

Zoller Elementary School, Schenectady