

AFROFUTURISM IN ANIMATION: SELF-IDENTITY OF AFRICAN AMERICANS IN
CINEMATIC STORYTELLING

by

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ABSTRACT

My work addresses the importance of self-identity within Black culture in the United States of America through the depiction of an African American boy who has to look into himself to overcome a difficult bullying situation. Animation as a medium is an ideal tool for interrogating the Western perspective of identity through cinematic storytelling. Using established animation methods, I created a visual narrative to portray the impact self-identity has on an individual's actions in certain social conditions. The film expands the medium of animation to subvert the narrative expectations of bullying and presents the idea of identity as a nonconforming concept. Making use of animation as a tool to analyze identity presents the notion that cinematic storytelling makes a cultural change.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

The researcher's body of work addresses the importance of self-identity within Black culture in the United States. Using Afrofuturist concepts as a framework, this study will contribute to expanding animation as a medium to interrogate the understanding of self-identity as an evolving image. Additionally, the temporal landscape of cinematic storytelling, as a cultural factor, has an impact on the actions of African Americans in bullying situations.

To understand the context of the study, it is essential to have knowledge of the framework in which these concepts interact with each other. According to Stuart Hall, the term "identity" as it relates to culture is grounded in the branches of social sciences (Hall 704). He states that identity can be defined as a collective of shared cultures. Furthermore, this concept supplements Afrofuturism, which is a transdisciplinary philosophy that explores the intersection of history and African diasporic culture. Afrofuturism emphasizes the exploration of race through technology to draw attention to the perception of individuals of a race (LaFleur).

Another subject the researcher will examine is the state of the African American culture in the United States from the time period of early 1900s to the present. Throughout this study the researcher will interchange African American culture and Black culture to describe the subjects of the topic. "African American" is considered an ethnicity and "Black" is considered a race, but these constructs are not mutually exclusive. Moreover, the framework of Afrofuturism expands on the concepts of race by posing a perspective that focuses on the factors used to establish this construct. Factors of race are scrutinized because of the lack of empirical evidence that suggests these factors to be objective. Most of the factors associated with the construct of race include a mixture of physical, behavioral, and cultural attributes (James).

An additional framework I am using for this study is based on Hall's theory of cultural identity. The theory presents culture as a construct with a transformative nature. Cultural identities are reflective of the history that has shaped it over time (Hall 706). Just as there are many points of similarities there are many differences. Hall suggests this position on culture is not bound by any particular point in history. He particularly addresses the need for a flexible perspective when representing culture that is different from Eurocentric cultures. I consider Hall's claim and further explore how his theory of cultural representation in cinema correlates with animated narratives. Cinematic storytelling makes use of story structures and visual techniques to depict a narrative that invokes an emotional response from the audience (Block 2). The application of visual storytelling along with the context of Afrofuturism is an ideal tool for depicting the fluid nature of culture in animated works.

Early mass media representations of Black culture reflected attitudes of the time period that left a legacy that separates African American culture from American culture. The concepts of Afrofuturism along with the visual techniques practiced in animation make for an unrestricted tool to cross-examine the impacts of American history and the legacy of Black culture in the United States. The Afrofuturist perspective presented by Dr. Lonny Avi Brooks contends, "Too often, narratives of the future look towards a post racial future as if race, gender, and class no longer matter when social science research confirms the near millennial effects of hundreds of years of the persistence of racial bias, discrimination, and socioeconomic echoes that will continue to reverberate and affect life changes in the near- and long-term future" (Brook 154). I concur with Brook's argument and emphasize that animated narratives depict how culture and history are intertwined.

Respectively, if animation functions as a medium that portrays a projection of history then it is worth stressing the implications Afrofuturism impresses on audiences and artist. The term Afrofuturism conveys a notion that the concepts are exclusively regarding people of African descent. Afrofuturism simply expands the context of black culture to include everyone regardless of their identity as an audience member or storyteller. Joseph Campbell states that stories are relatable to everyone because they are centered around the human experience. (Collington 48). Afrofuturism addresses these issues in a way that includes Black culture by negating the negative perspective of Eurocentric American storytelling.

I will analyze animated works that contain a spectrum of Afrocentric ideas that are expanded through the framework of Afrofuturism. In my film I will contextualize these concepts through cinematic devices that use these ideas in an animated short that addresses bullying. My film will extend this style in cinematic storytelling through the practical use of visual techniques that include: story, space, color, movement, rhythm, line, and shape. Through this application I will deconstruct a relatable concept into essential motifs that portray an Afrofuturistic outlook.

Social Phenomenon

The current status of African American culture must be identified in order to understand the social barriers Afrofuturist works must overcome. In other words, George Orwell wrote a statement that accurately describes the status of American culture, “Who controls the past controls the future: who controls the present controls the past.” (qtd. in Dery). African Americans today are treated much differently than their pre-Civil Rights predecessors dating back to 1954. Though conditions have improved, America is not a post-racial society and the issues prevalent during the Civil Rights Movement are still relevant today. The impact of American History established social constructs that alienates an entire culture to benefit the

majority. Today, African American individuals are plagued by microaggressions, colorism, and learned behaviors that continue to form dissonance throughout the culture. According to Professor Chester M. Pierce, a social phenomenon that leaves negative impressions on any individual is microaggression. (Solorzano, Ceja and Yosso 60) This is a commonplace dialogue, behavioral, or environmental practice rather, intentional or unintentional that communicates hostile, prejudicial, or derogatory attitudes. This term microaggression is often scrutinized when used because of its implications. For example, the following scenario is this researcher's personal anecdote that accurately depicts a microaggression:

Spider-man is an iconic fictional character that most audiences can identify. This fictional character appealed to many audiences, especially children, of all races, between the ages of 6-10. In grade school when I would interact with my peers' role-playing was a common form of play. We would pretend to be our favorite heroes, villains, and many other roles. When I, an African American male, role played as Spider-man, my peers told me to stop. When I questioned their request, I was simply told: "You don't look like Spider-man".

Due to the subjectivity of microaggression, it is not possible to determine the intention of the remarks made by my peers. From that day on, their impression left me believing that I could only role play heroes that looked like myself. The cultural factors surrounding this interaction are problematic. Since America is an individualistic culture, people are often instilled with the idea that they can be whoever or whatever they want to be (Underberg-Goode). For the first time in my life, I felt as if this sentiment did not apply to me. One of the many issues here is the barrier that still exists between cultures, formed through constructs founded in a time where African Americans were viewed as less than full citizens.

In 1983, poet, novelist, and social activist, Alice Walker popularized the term "colorism". It is the idea that the lighter one's complexion, the more receptive the majority of

people are to accept them. This idea has directly influenced the attitudes African Americans have towards Black culture. The effects of colorism have led African Americans to conform to Eurocentric aesthetics to be well received. Eurocentric aesthetics include lighter complexions, straight hair, and bright colored eyes. Physical modifications are commonly practiced today in order to achieve Eurocentric aesthetics. Based on Mark Hill's study on colorism this includes hair texture, eye color, and skin complexion. The racialized context of colorism stems from the concepts of slavery in the United States. As a result, Black people have formed their own biases towards each other. It is very much a part of the legacy of Black culture in America and it is due to this context that the African American identity is greatly impacted by Eurocentric values (Hill 77-78).

Cinematic Depictions of Culture in America

According to Stuart Hall, his framework for addressing cultural identity and cinematic representations claim that incorporating the theory of enunciation to expand the perspectives in which these stories are created will introduce a more inclusive range of characters and stories. The theory states, "though we speak of ourselves from our own experience, nevertheless who speaks, the subjects who are spoken of are never exactly in the same place" (Hall 704). Cultural dissonance in American culture stems from the outcomes of the historical eras that influenced modern social constructs. These outcomes include slavery, racism, misrepresentation, and many more. Animation produces narratives for large audiences and has a role in contributing to the portrayal of stories that reflect culture (Collington 49-50). Afrofuturism as a concept, is another perspective that actively expands the value of African culture in America, by promoting diverse concepts that would reform the cultural lens in which stories are created. My film expands the context of African American culture in animated narratives by constructing themes that are often

exploited with Afrofuturism, utilizing cinematic techniques to abstract the depiction of a bullying conflict.

CHAPTER 2: IDENTITY

An individual's personal experience will greatly influence the thematic nature of the stories they share. If there are commonalities across cultures, then these commonalities present an alarming question. How is there dissonance across cultures in the United States if Black culture is a part of American history? This is largely due to the racialized past of America and the portrayal of Black culture in early mass media. To further interrogate how Afrofuturism will reform cultural depictions in the future, the past and present must be addressed. This section largely focuses on the historical context and characterizations of Black culture in animated works of the 1900s.

Animated Depictions of Black Culture in America

Media portrayal has contributed to the perception of African cultures in the United States. Christopher Lehman, Author of "Colored Cartoon: Black Presentation in American Animated Short Films 1907-1954", provides detailed accounts of the role mass media has on the portrayal of African American culture up to the 1970s. According to Lehman, portrayal of African Americans in this time period had a major impact on the legacy of Black culture (Lehman 122). For many years, ideas that concurred with the racialized past, greatly impacted the cultural identities of African Americans in animated works. For example, the way black characters spoke and acted in animated stories were shared with the world and these portrayals were often associated with stereotypes. Lehman breaks down the characterizations portrayed in animated pieces of the 1930's and observes, "African Americans played mostly supporting roles as

domestic servants or rural slaves” (Lehmen 38). At this point in American history people were adjusting to the stock market crash of 1929 and depictions of Black culture were scrutinized more than ever. Despite the racially driven attitudes of the time period Lehman points out how the production studios relied on stylization to depict African American culture in animated content. “...because of their large mouths, frogs were considered suitable animals to depict as African Americans.” (Lehmen 39). Although there were efforts to acknowledge African Americans in animated works, the undertones of these anthropomorphic depictions accurately reflect the attitudes towards Black culture.

Cultural depictions through stylization is one of the foundational concepts in establishing an Afrofuturistic aesthetic. It is also during this time period that Afrofuturism began to take form in music, literature and much later visual art. At this point in American History, people were adjusting to society after experiencing the Great Depression which were a series of events that caused a strain on the American infrastructure. It was during the 1930’s that Production Code Administration (PCA) regulated the expectations for representation of minority groups in mass media. This greatly impacted how people of African descent perceived their role in a society that essentially alienated their culture. Lehmen describes depictions that reveal how animation reflects culture.

During the 20th century, black characters in animated works were depicted to have overly large facial proportions, unintelligible speech, and subservient roles to the characters that were not black. Although these were caricatures, over time they became the context for stereotypes associated with Black people in animated media. Such stereotyping has formed a different narrative for people of African descent. Economically, African Americans were not considered the target audience of media therefore, media depiction appealed to an American

society that expected these stereotypes (Lehmen 10). During Jim Crow time period, these exaggerations were received by many as a current reality; and morality was not in question because it was not wrong to express such ideas.

The viewpoint of this time period dates back to the Reconstruction Era (1865-1877). The Jim Crow Laws were established to enforce segregation between White people and people of color. Many Black people that lived in rural areas continued to work as sharecroppers which at the time was equated to slavery due to the attitudes of the time period. Although practices of slavery were abolished, these laws did not guarantee the civil rights of African Americans (Constitutional Rights Foundation). As a result, black culture in American history spent many years being perceived as lesser members of the American infrastructure, with civil rights less than that of the born American. These attitudes shifted as the Civil Rights movement began to address racial issues of the time period. Cinematic depictions reflected these perspectives moving into the late 20th century.

Considering the impacts of American history, the context of African American culture is complex. Yet, animated media created before the end of the Civil Rights Movement focused on narratives that appealed to White American audiences. Going into the late 20th Century, there are vast differences in media depiction of African Americans compared to other races. Cultural viewpoints that reflected racial biases at this time were being challenged which echoes the historical turning point of American History.

Archetypes in Media

By the late 20th-century, media depiction challenged the values being shown in visual narratives as they related to African Americans. In order to analyze how Black characters are portrayed in archetypes it is vital to define character Archetypes as they relate to animated

works. Archetypes are present in many subjects. Heroes, villains, bullies, and damsels are all considered archetypes (Collington 49). Archetypes are recurrent throughout a story and are often drawn from ideas that have been present in a culture. Unfortunately, what remains unresolved is the archetype of any black character in distributed media. For example, African Americans depicted in media intended for mass consumption were portrayed as individuals whose roles were still secondary to characters portrayed with more Eurocentric traits. The archetype of a hero, villain, supporting character and many other roles in American culture continued to include race, gender, and sexuality as leading determinants for character traits. The outcome from this inclusion led to the idea that the hero of the story must align with the expectations of Western audiences. Afrofuturism addresses these character traits by adding to the existing context of these archetypes by reimagining the function identity from a cultural perspective.

Factoring all these figurative elements, archetypal features of characters with an African descent, placed value in the aspects that did not celebrate the physical features of these characters, but instead, conformed to the roles most American audiences accepted and deemed palatable. African American archetypes today are still being formed through the lens of American history, but the view is shifting away from the concepts passed on from America's turbulent history.

Afrofuturism is one of the many concepts that ensure future generations do not pass on the values that have now been deemed irredeemable. It is not that Afrofuturism changes the archetypes in a story structure, but it provides a frame of references to draw from when considering the layered narrative of a character in any given story.

When examining popular animated characters, the archetypes of these characters are allegorical figures that are familiar to many in the field. For example, let's analyze an animated

fictional character Clark Kent. In this tale, Clark works for a news press. He is considered the “new guy in town” and he is like any common person, striving to work his way into a higher status. At age 33, Clark discovered that he is not just an ordinary man; because when the world is in danger, he takes on the identity of Superman. With great power, unyielding morals, and a pure heart; Superman will do anything to protect the place he considers home. Superman is not human. He is from another planet called Krypton. Superman is criticized on a frequent basis because the very people he risks his life for, continue to crucify his character out of fear. Superman’s struggles with human nature because he is more than just a man, although at the story's end, he feels no different than anyone else who would have faced his dilemma. He is godlike but has the heart of a common man. In short, Clark Kent is an alien that was raised as a human but inherited the strength of a god because of his lineage. Another allegorical figure Americans are familiar with that performed amazing feats at age 33 is a notable figure in the Christian faith, Jesus the son of God. As his story goes, he was also crucified by the very people he cared for and dealt with the fragilities of human nature.

When analyzing any characters of African descent in the media, one must contextualize or factor the inspiration of these characters as derived from stereotypes that influenced their role in the story. The roles of Black character as any archetype do not affect the audiences’ perception of the plot but more so their perception of the character’s meaning, outside of the given context. Researcher Melissa Crum provides a thorough examination of the formula used to depict contemporary Black characters. She argues that Black characters in American features are created with the intention to maintain “whiteness” due to the cultural impacts of American history and audiences need to become conscious consumers of media (Crum 23). Traits commonly associated with Black characters in animated works produced in America depict them

as individuals that are usually less than amicable, prideful, and stubborn despite their archetype (Crum 27). Conversely, there is also the idea of tokenism when portraying Black characters in which they bear the context of inclusivity in an animated narrative to satisfy the majority of American audiences. When these traits are ascribed to Black characters it undercuts their role in the message conveyed by the storyteller.

Characters such as Cyborg, Static Shock, and Hancock come to mind. Even though these characters fit the hero archetype, their flaws are often associated with stereotypes outside of the context from the story. For example, when examining the actions of Cyborg his values align with the Eurocentric idea of a hero at the expense of his humanity. Static's story takes place in reality that show implications of oppression due to various forms of discrimination. Characters in *Static Shock* are defined by social constructs that do not expand the context of the characters portrayal. Lastly, Hancock is a dynamic character, yet the nuances of his character align with the stereotypes associated with black men; in turn, this undermines his heroic qualities. Cyborg, Static Shock, and Hancock when compared to Eurocentric characters reveal the need to examine the context used to create a character for cinematic stories. This is because of the culture surrounding the context of the character these actions are often interpreted differently due to a narrow perspective.

Cyborg from *FlashPoint Paradox* has a character structure that fits in the hero archetype and the philosophy conveyed through his character reflects the perspective of Afrofuturism. As a result of an accident, Victor Stone known as Cyborg, is saved with highly volatile technology. He gains the abilities to protect the Earth from threats of any caliber, but his powers come with a cost. In the story, his humanity is the toll for using his powers to protect society. The internal conflict of Cyborg is a clear visualization of Afrofuturism as it revolves around black culture in

the United States. Cyborg's moral dilemma is between saving others at the cost of his humanity for a society that does not fully embrace him or retreating into himself to preserve the humanity he has left. To contextualize this concept to part of the Black experience in America, African Americans actively seek out ways to maintain social balance at the expense of their personal expression (Hughes 7).

Cyborg is portrayed as the president's "lap dog" because of his motivation to seek out peace, regardless of the effects it has on his well-being. He was depicted as a character that does not get along with the protagonist of the story, yet his role was that of a hero. Ultimately Cyborg's decisions led to his death and the conflict remained unresolved because of the flaws of another that fulfilled the role of the "hero" archetype based on Western audiences' expectations. After examining Cyborg's role as the hero archetype, I subscribe to Crum's argument for conscious consumption of media and pose questions. If his character was on the same side of morality as the protagonist, why was he depicted as a nuisance? Are characters similar to Cyborg meant to contrast the morals of Flash or Superman to convey a deeper message? As an audience member is it within reason to perceive this character as a nuisance? Referring to the framework of cultural identity provided by Hall, these visual narratives are fueled by imagination and spark inspiration in others. This is an indicator that reveals in the collective imaginations of content creators; there is a stigma with black characters fitting in the archetype of the hero. I argue that Afrofuturism eradicates the stigma associated with black characters by circumventing biases to reform the archetype of the Black hero.

CHAPTER 3 IMPACT OF ANIMATION ON IDENTITY

Social Context Beyond the Medium

Animation, as a medium, relays a message outside of the American culture in which it is created (McLuhan). Reading a book about a subject has a different communicative value than viewing a video on the same subject. Since the existence of mankind, visual stories have always been a way to pass down knowledge to future generations. Although animation is modern storytelling through visual mediums; it has been a practice dating back to the era of hunters and gatherers (Collington 48). For instance, visual depictions in cave painting and hieroglyphs illustrate phases of events. Although these visual narratives were not always tales of fiction as mankind continued to develop, these stories became more than a document of events and ceremonies but an early record of civilization.

Visual narratives began to further depict awareness of social constructs that are formed to create the idea of what it meant to be “civil”. Animation is a medium much like other visual mediums that depict ontological subjects in a manner that transcends communicative barriers (Collington 232). Furthermore, animation relies on visual language as a communicative vehicle to address a subject. However, animation has the capability of deconstructing a concept to convey a message to a wide range of audiences (Block 2). Subjects that occur in these stories reflect our perception of our existence. The same message intended for a young adult to understand can be conveyed to a child using animation. For example, in 1936, *Snow White* was considered a classic animated film by our contemporary standards. The film addresses subject matters related to dualism, materialism, and idealism. There are factors that influence how the

film is interpreted yet the themes addressed in this film can be attributed to the metaphysical topics that individuals experience in a lifetime (Collington 19).

In animation, it is vital to give the character traits that the audience can relate to in their own experience, age, economic level, features, preferences. Most of the stories portrayed in an animated medium will form a connection with any given audience because the subjects addressed are relatable experiences. Animation conveys messages that reflect social constructs that extend the communication of issues beyond the medium. Portraying certain characters that are inspired by everyday interactions convey a level of believability that validates established constructs. However, Afrofuturism in animation introduces more than aesthetic choices to the medium. The context these visual narratives are drawn from is interrogated by the concepts introduced by Afrofuturism.

Afrocentric Influences in Animation

There are prevalent tropes utilizing imagery that is a more accurate contemporary view of Black culture. These visual narratives do not adopt Afrofuturist aesthetics nevertheless, they focus on relevant issues in African American cultures. In fact, these shows adopt an Afrocentric perspective to celebrate Black culture, create a conversation that forms a sense of purpose in society, and form a dialogue about the social constructs that are dealt with on a daily basis. For example, shows such as *The Proud Family*, *The Boondocks*, *Fat Albert and the Cosby Kids* align with Afrocentric ideas. *The Proud Family* captures the everyday life of a group of minorities that are pursuing their dreams in a suburban environment. Episode themes center around family and building a sense of community. The context used to establish a sense of togetherness in the show presents a central conflict that reflect issues in Black culture today. The show explores Black identity through consumerism, racial identity, and familial relationships. *Fat Albert and the*

Cosby Kids follows the everyday life of Black boys from an urban environment. The show portrays the importance of accepting self-identity despite personal circumstances. It was educational and effective at portraying applicable social skills for individuals who identified with lower socioeconomic status. The show was produced in the 1970's and it really captured the essence of the low-income urban environment. Most of the character endeavors took place in a junkyard. Lastly, *The Boondocks* was a satire that mirrored popular culture in a presentational manner. The show was presentational in the sense of how events based on real figures were exaggerated to establish an overtly humorous tone. The show juxtaposes urban African American identities against suburban American identities. The central conflicts of each episode often highlighted ways the political climate acted as a gatekeeper of Black culture in America. Topics prevalent in Black culture are depicted to general audiences in a way that invokes dialogue across cultures, and it is through this dialogue that audiences can become informed about historical impacts through a cultural perspective. Classism, colorism, discrimination, and overrepresentation are a few factors addressed in contemporary animated works regarding Black culture.

As an example, the animated short "Hair Love" 2019 produced by Sony Animation Studios depicts implications of underrepresentation of Black culture in the beauty and hair industry. The short focuses on a Black girl who struggles with styling her hair. She looks to her father for help but her hair proves to be too much. Today, it is estimated that 70% to 80% of black women chemically straighten their hair. (Banks qt. in Thompson) In the 1980s, weaves raised the black beauty bar even higher to hair that is not just straight, but also very long (Byrd & Tharp Tate qt. in Thompson). The protagonist of this story was determined to style her natural hair without relying on practices established to alter the texture of her hair. The film concludes

with the father and daughter styling her hair with the help of an online tutorial provided by her mother who specializes in styling hair that is particularly attributed to Black women. This topic is not something that would be written in American history books. Educator Michael Romanowski addresses the biases in American textbooks and claims, "...being 'factual' does not necessarily mean being unbiased, or value-free," (Romanowski 171). Furthermore, he supports this claim by stating how the authority of language utilized by textbook publishers leaves an impression that foregoes the facts and understates the experience of minority groups. In sum, American textbooks offer a viewpoint from a perspective that implies biases. Understanding the biases inlaid with the retelling of historical events, it is possible that dialogue with a black consumer affected by underrepresentation of the hair product industry can provide insight that intersects facts with cultural values. The theme of this animated short does not exclusively address the hair product industries of the US but utilizes the issue as the relevant context outside of animation.

Afrofuturism inherits these concepts and expands cinematic visuals by establishing discourse that transcends the depicted conflict of animated narratives. In the aforementioned examples, the stories are portrayed in a representational style. To clarify, these visual narratives are portrayed in styles that are representative of a reality as it is perceived by American audiences today. The cinematic context of Afrofuturism is diverse and encourages the use of abstraction through cinematic techniques that challenge the perception of reality.

Case Study: Static Shock

I will analyze modern work, *Static Shock* using the framework established as a means to interpret the context of these examples. This change is a prime example of Afrofuturism within Black culture. The themes addressed in every episode are the subjects addressed in Afrofuturist

works. The story occurs in a fictional world much like the other Dixie Comics (DC) animated series and depicts the journey of an African American teenager that was bestowed with superpowers through a tragic accident staged by a secret government agency. Although the protagonist in the story, Virgil Hawkins, has extraordinary gifts, we learn that he is vulnerable to the everyday issues that greatly impact minority groups. Even though *Static Shock* targets all American audiences, it is salient that the characters facing these issues are of disenfranchised groups. For instance, the show addresses the outcomes of classism, discrimination, mental disorders and many more topics that are perceived to be prevalent in Black culture. When in reality, the same conditions are found in all cultures. It is worth noting that largely focusing on Black characters facing these issues convey a message beyond the medium.

One episode of the series takes the focus away from Virgil and more on his friend, Rubberband Man. Rubberband Man has a learning disability known as Dyslexia. The depiction of how this character addresses the matter and overcomes the issue is what leaves a lasting impression on Black audiences. A hurdle for African Americans to overcome is the collective attitude towards learning disabilities. According to Earlise Ward, the cause for this collective attitude is gender and age differences in beliefs, attitudes, and coping. All of these aspects are considered factors in self-identity. Furthermore, this collective attitude correlates to mental illness. According to U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Office of Minority Health, census data reveals 6.8 million African Americans reported having mental illness which is 13% of the African American population in the US (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Office of Minority Health). The character struggled with reading because he had a disability to address and his level of intellect was not the underlying contributor to his condition. As the result of Rubberband Man's disability, a conversation within the African American community about

learning disabilities shifts focus away from demeaning the intellectual aptitude of an individual. The characters portrayed in the narrative of *Static Shock* are extraordinary individuals who use their powers to understand the circumstances of their reality. In the end, Rubberband Man learned his mind needs to be as flexible as his limbs if he is to become a proper hero and friend to everyone. Characters make use of their abilities, exploit their relationship with technology, and identify how they perceive themselves in their world.

The Afrofuturist perspective is ubiquitous when incorporating these concepts into visual narratives. This is because the aesthetics draw from contemporary Afrocentric styles and science fiction tropes. *Static Shock* is a clear example of how Afrofuturist concepts can be incorporated with styles that exist to convey a message that extends beyond the medium.

Case Study: Black Panther

In Marvel's 2018 *Black Panther*, the blend of Afrocentric aesthetics with Afrofuturist concepts set a milestone for the standards of the depiction of African Culture in media. This film contains animated elements that really expand on the idea of technological innovation. The film excels in shattering the mold of stereotypes about African cultures through the Afrofuturist concepts. *Black Panther* depicts a fictional African tribe that existed throughout history while remaining concealed from the world affairs that left heavy impacts on African culture. The fictional nation of Wakanda has pushed technological advances several years ahead of "advanced" technology in the modern era. Wakanda was able to thrive because colonization never occurred, and as a result, the people of the nation were unhindered to practice many disciplines. The slave trade never occurred in this part of Africa. Unlike the Black people affected by colonization, the Wakandan tribe strongly identified with their heritage in this nation. The setting of this fictional world blends science fiction with African culture that truly

establishes the Afrofuturist perspective of the narrative. There is a deeper connection for individuals that have had the experience of living as someone of African descent. Wakanda as a nation, had the power to deter the events that led to traumatic outcomes for African descendants. Specifically, the film addresses the events of American history because the antagonist of the film was greatly impacted by the lack of action by Wakandan delegates. He antagonizes the tribe because they had the means and technology to help people of African descent. He points out their only effective actions left him without a father and led him down his “villainous” path.

It is vital that visual narratives extend beyond the medium because these are the messages that leave an impression on the audience. Animation as a tool for depicting stories, has the inherent ability to relay implicit messages because of how audiences interpret visual information. Granted, everyone can't be Rubberband Man or Black Panther, but everyone can identify a problem and be proactive before others suffer the consequences. Afrofuturism, by contextualizing characters in non-stereotypical environments extends the conversation on topics of African American culture while remaining inclusive for other audiences as well.

Today, there is a concerted effort to communicate about social inclusivity in animated works that address the variations of stereotypical roles within human interactions. As previously stated, African Americans have been misrepresented by mass distributed media because of the ideas expressed prior to the Civil rights movement. When portrayed in the media, most of the depictions further exaggerated the discrepancies between the African American minorities and other American cultures. However, Afrofuturism confronts these depictions and circumvents the ethical argument inherent in these representations.

CHAPTER 4 AFROFUTURISM

The practice of Afrofuturism is influential beyond the medium. The concepts can be considered as tools that shape the temporal landscape of cinematic storytelling. The practice of incorporating this style into animated works is relatively new and underrepresented. There is still a great need for significant research that defines Afrofuturism standards to be conducted and added to the body of Afrofuturism. It has been apparent in music and literature for many years. However, there is not a standard method for how these ideas are depicted in animated works. As a concept, Afrofuturism examines social constructs that were formed due to tense race relations in African diaspora communities and places emphasis on exploiting oppressive behavior through technological means to reimagine a future where individuals of African descent are included with the majority. The term “African Diaspora” refers to the migration of ethnic groups of African descent that have resettled in various societies (Palmer). The group I will be highlighting are the African Americans that have resettled in the United States due to the Transatlantic Slave trade that occurred between 16th and 19th century. This migration was a result of colonization and led to communities of African Americans that would be several generations removed from their African heritages. The legacy of African American culture would take shape from resettling in a society that would lead to the issues African Americans deal with in the present day. Afrofuturism origins date back to the 1930’s with musician and intellectual Herman Poole Blount. Even though slavery was abolished, people of color, regardless of skin complexion, were still living the devastations from the impact of the Jim Crow laws (LaFleur). In 1936 Blount

changed his name to Sun Ra and concluded that there was not a place safe on Earth for people that looked like him.

Through poetry, science, and music, Sun Ra inspired a train of thought that would lead to ideas brilliant enough to reimagine the future for people of African descent. He invented new outlooks to contrast Eurocentrism and assigned terms and meanings to expand on established concepts. Sun Ra is most noted for his “archestral” performance titled “Space is the Place” which is his perspective on an orchestra that captures the sounds of space. These themes would influence future generations and inspired literature, music, and art that would gain attention in the 1990s. In fact, Mark Dery coined the term Afrofuturism in 1994 with his essay titled “Black to the Future” in which he interviewed three notable African American science fiction writers. Upon interviewing Samuel R. Delany, Tricia Rose, and Greg Tate; Mark drew attention to the undertones of these artists’ works. Science fiction novels that form parallels with real-life issues that are prevalent in social justice. The characters in their works are non-human or alien with physical characteristics often assigned to individuals of African descent. When the protagonist of these novels realized they were treated differently because of their traits they used unique abilities to transcend the racial overtones cast upon them. As Dery interviews each author he draws attention to how the experience of an alien reveals many parallels to people of Black culture. Colonization was likened to an abduction, excessive authoritative force could be rationalized as probing, and repressive laws targeted towards aliens were compared to the laws targeted at minorities.

Cultural Context

Afrofuturism as a genre addresses the common themes found in science fiction, such as alienation, estrangement, and technology. These stories address social issues that negatively

impact African American culture. Characters go as far as changing their skin tones, and exploiting technology, to depict a reality to work in their favor and disrupt the status quo to challenge society's constructs. Such discourse surrounding Afrofuturism includes interrogating the Eurocentric view of history. Furthermore, Afrofuturism juxtaposes the Western perspectives with Afrocentric concepts to reveal a different position on culture as it relates to context surrounding animation.

Referencing the Black Panther case study, the protagonists of this story had all the means to protect people from these outcomes but as a nation, remained isolated. Although this nation was isolated, the rest of African cultures affected by colonialism suffered. The complex motives of the antagonist have a sense of righteousness when considering the current social structures of African cultures around the world. The film interrogates the idea of what the world could be if African cultures were afforded opportunities in a nation unaffected by Eurocentrism. Although the type of technology accessible by most does not compare to the technology of Wakanda, it questions the actions people of African descent can take in order to preserve the legacy of African diasporic culture.

How can culture and technology be a means to bridge the social disparity between cultures? Afrofuturism reimagines a future where these topics are addressed, using themes associated with science fiction. One theory that is vital to comprehending the contemporary impacts of Afrofuturism in diasporic communities is “Technogenesis”. This concept states as technology expands, it will shape the way individuals identify in the future. (Afrofuturism 2.0) Traces of this idea are present in today’s society where technology has very much become a factor that impacts self-identity. The use of smartphones, social media and media consumption are clear indicators how much culture has changed due to the advances in technology. The

question posed regarding African diasporic communities is, what does this forecast for Black heritage in a society where culture is largely influenced by a majority that, technically speaking, have expressed attitudes that disrespect Black culture? The theme of isolation was apparent with the main characters of the film. The protagonist deals with the isolation of legacy differently than the antagonist. Ultimately the message conveyed through the narrative portrays the perspective of the antagonist as a redeemable cause. The antagonist's final declaration is to die at the bottom of the Atlantic with his ancestors instead of living as a prisoner in his homeland. Isolation is a common theme addressed in science fiction pieces. These characters are not stranded or literal aliens to the world but their experiences and their attempts to cope with social constructs of the world form a figurative sense of isolation. The context of Afrofuturism as it pertains to my film makes use of these elements by forming a theme that manifests Afrofuturist ideas through stylized depictions of character, story, and environments.

CHAPTER 5: FILM ANALYSIS

Animation removes us from the immediacy of the subject. This is the ideal platform for an artist to express complex themes while appealing to many audiences. There are many styles of animation, ranging from hand-drawn animation to computer-generated images. Each of these styles has an aesthetic that is intended to appeal to certain audiences. The tactile appearance of a stop-motion piece has a different impact than a CG animated piece. Understanding the impact mediums have on the practice of animation is essential for layering meanings outside of the context in which the message was delivered.

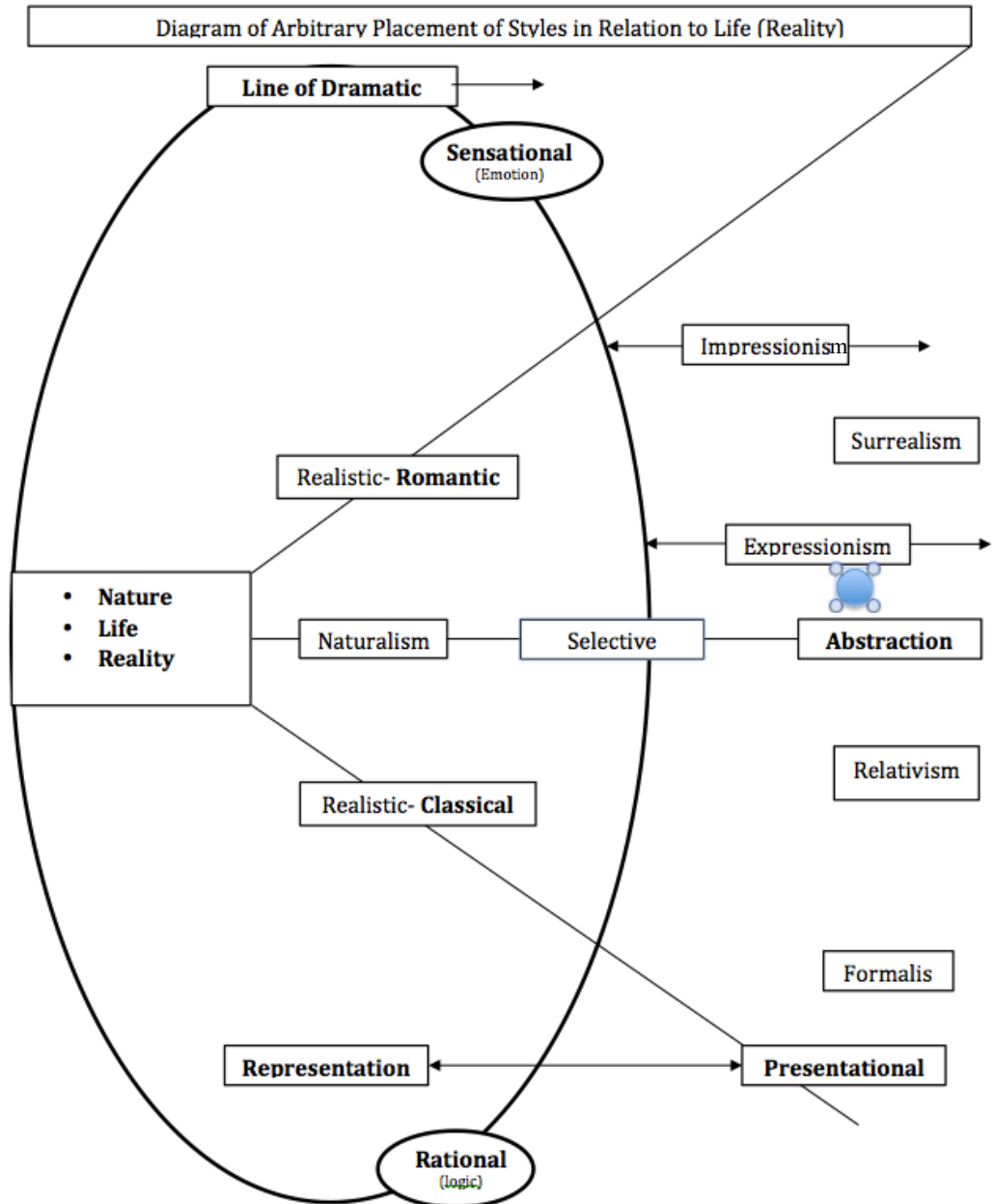


Figure 1 Diagram of Arbitrary Placement of Styles in Relation to Life (Reality) by Phil Peters drawn by Dana Barnes

The various mediums of animation and film depict stories that can range between a spectrum of styles to portray certain concepts. For example, Mark Collington emphasizes how “The Boondocks” illustrate satirical stories of the Black experience in America as an abstract

story with over-the-top depictions of people or events based on real stories. To place the series on the “Arbitrary Placement of Style Based on Reality” it would fall near Relativism. One genre of animation notable for this is Anime (Collington 56). The creators behind *The Boondocks* decided to portray the story with a semi-realistic Anime style because they believed people would not fully receive the depth of the artists’ message if they were shown in any other manner. The creators believed that if they did not ground the abstracted episodes inspired by true events in what is perceived as relativism, the intention of the satire would be lost (Collington 183). The Boondocks relied on vulgarity and self-parody to keep audiences aware of the intended message. It is also worth noting if *The Boondocks* were too representational it would have been likened to a form of kitsch (Gubar 1).

Animation in many respects is akin to filmmaking. Both mediums rely on practical application and story structure to imagine a narrative that is relatable to the audience. While animation as a medium provides this platform, Crum’s claim that audiences should be conscious of the context they consume through media is applicable in this case. She further claims the characterizations of Black characters in cinema could desensitize audiences to the underlying message of a serious issue. My film exploits the spectacle of bullying while keeping the audience aware of the context through style. I am proposing that deconstructing the central conflict of a story to a representational abstraction will appeal to the audience and keep them conscious of the underlying message. Regardless of the form, Afrofuturism is delivered, the cinematic context will help to set new standards for Black cultural representation in animation.

In my film, Afrofuturism is used to illustrate a story that is inspired by practices African American adolescents perform to cope with bullying situations. Self-identity is comprised of race, technology, and culture. The context of my film covers a bullying conflict, but the subtext

addresses the context of self-identity from the perspective of an African American boy. I rely on the concept of technogenesis as it relates to Afrofuturism to keep the audience aware of the protagonist's identity. From the Afrofuturist perspective, technology is a means for transcending definitions of race, biases, and cultural expectations. The film portrays a common occurrence that could happen in an American public school through motifs that represent essential factors of this conflict. These factors include characterizations, visual motifs of the characters' actions, and an ambiguous environment to subvert the expectations of Western audiences. I will provide a detailed analysis of my film using the aforementioned concepts established in previous sections.

Bullying, a Social Phenomenon

My film adapts motifs of Afrofuturism to explore relationships with technologies that are very much branded in our social identity today. Much of the story is the depiction of a deconstructed mind space. Drawing influences from styles such as Surrealism, Futurism, and Afrofuturism, the film focuses attention on the internal struggle of an African American boy. The point of conflict is depicted in his mind space because according to U.S Department of Health and Human Services overcoming bullying is not always the power you exert over others. This piece subverts the expectations of a standoff against a bully and coincides with the concepts adapted from Afrofuturism. Subversion of the audiences' expectations are vital because depicting this narrative within the expectations of the stereotypical standoff glorifies the stereotypes associated with black male adolescents in America.

In 2014, the Centers for Disease Control and Department of Education released the first federal consistent definition of bullying for research and observation, "The two modes of bullying include direct (e.g., bullying that occurs in the presence of a targeted youth) and indirect (e.g., bullying not directly communicated to a targeted youth such as spreading rumors). In addition to these two modes, the four types of bullying include broad categories of physical, verbal, relational (e.g., efforts to harm the reputation or relationships of the targeted youth), and damage to property." (U.S Department of Health and Human Services). Violence is often associated with bullying from the cultural lens of Western audiences. My piece focuses on self-resolve. The narrative of Afrofuturism establishes that people of Black culture are stereotyped with traits that are associated with aggression. Afrofuturist concepts introduce the notion of one retreating in their "Blackness" to find solace. According to findings of the Government Accountability Offices, Black adolescent boys are treated much differently than

other ethnic groups in a public school setting due to the established norms of American culture. When a Black adolescent male displays behavior that would be accepted by their non-Black peers for facing same or similar unwarranted opposition, the ramifications are far more severe. For example, if a Black adolescent boy attempted to defend himself from a bullying situation, and as a result, the bully was injured that Black adolescent boy would become victimized twice. Not only would the victim suffer from being bullied, he would probably be punished for defending himself. Unfortunately, this isn't a show I just described above, this is a reality for many Black American boys.

In the case of my animated piece, the concept of an African American boy retreating into parts of his identity to resolve his issue was examined. The catalyst of the plot is the act of bullying. A bully can utilize many tools to oppress others. Bullying is not just a brief social occurrence, it could cause affects that last throughout adulthood that often result in the victims struggling for acceptance. Bullying often involves the person committing the act, the person being bullied, and the bystanders (U.S Department of Health and Human Services). Furthermore, these factors are not mutually exclusive and more often than not, people usually experience multiple factors at once during any given occurrence of bullying. However, the good news is, there are measures to prevent the occurrence of bullying. Most of these methods involve addressing the questions: What happens when there are no adults to actively prevent these occurrences? What can an individual do at the moment to cope with the stress of being bullied? What can an individual do for themselves to avoid being bullied? The simple answer is to develop coping mechanisms. These techniques are vital when it comes to dealing with the factors of bullying. Coping mechanisms in this instance include: Speaking up, speaking out, assessing the situation, adopting self-control strategies

I chose bullying as a context to establish the central conflict of my film because it happens to 49% of individuals between grades 4-12 according findings of 2017 (U.S Department of Health and Human Services). Based on data this topic was a relatable conflict to almost half of the audiences that have attended public schools in United States. Many individuals that have attended public schools in the United States recall how their grade school experience impacted how they identify with themselves in American culture. For many Black adolescents in US public schools this is where they learn how they must identify due to the racial biases imposed by peers and superiors. This experience affects their perception of their identity in America with institutions outside of the public-school system as revealed by a survey conducted for National Public Radio (NPR), the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF), and Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health.

“In the context of beliefs about the national environment, 92% of all African Americans believe that discrimination against African Americans exists in America today. Nearly half (49%) of African Americans believe that discrimination based on individual prejudice is the bigger problem, compared to 25% of African Americans who say discrimination based in laws and government policies is the bigger problem. Another 25% say both are equally problematic.” (NPR, RWJF, Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health 25).

These statistics were collected in order to record personal accounts of African American experiences in the US. I contend that the findings of Harvard T.H Chan School of Public Health and U.S Department of Health and Human Services correlate and provide insight to understanding the perception of African Americans as it pertains to their identity. Through exploration of these findings I establish cinematic elements that portray a bullying conflict that exaggerates the perception of identity as a superpower.

Cinematic Elements

Cinematic techniques involving visual structures, space, line and shape, color, tone, rhythm, and story are essential tools for using animation as a medium that challenges the audience to cross examine the themes of any visual narrative. In my film, I the use line, shape, and space to influence the audience's perception of space. The visual languages of the characters convey their personalities nature through their design shapes. The goal of each shot aims to progress the conflict through character actions.

Color throughout the film was used to establish the thematic context of the characters based on structural elements that rely on Structuralism. Collington describes how language theory is present in visual narratives through the theory of structuralism. As a theory that pertains to my film, structuralism introduce concepts such as symbolic, iconic, and indexical signs (Collington 19). The colors in my film are symbolic because they are used to define characters using the conventional meanings of the colors understood by Western cultures. I used iconic features when designing the characters to present a clear tone for each character. Juxtaposing the characters' color schemes and showing indicators of the protagonist functioned as an index for the audience to identify character traits that foreshadow moments throughout the film.

All of these elements combined with story structure made for clear context. I amalgamated two story structures that are used in visual narratives and addressed the message of the film by assessing the conflict from an Afrofuturist view. I condensed Campbell's story theory proposed in "The Hero's Journey" to fit in the model of Jeremy Cantor's and Pepe Valencia's short story model called the "villain" format. In short, the Hero's Journey is comprised of three acts and usually involves several archetypes. (Cantor, Valencia 40) This format is often adopted for many feature length works, but the structure of this format was considerably dense for creating an animated short. I adapted The Villain Format to focus essential aspects that would

deliver a clear message to audiences. This adapted structure emphasizes a conflict between a hero and a villain that can be described in four parts. The villain attempts to disturb the hero, the villain intrudes successfully, the hero must gain resolve, and the hero confronts the villain hopeful for victory.

My story is from the perspective of an imaginative 12-year-old African American boy named Emory. His handheld gaming device is very much part of his identity and he spends most of his time playing as his favorite character in a role-playing-game (RPG). Outside of the game, he is a non-confrontational, soft-spoken, and mild-mannered African American adolescent. Emory's escapism is interfered with by a bully. Faced with adversity, he must gain the strength to confront a difficult situation.

The protagonist of this film has an extensive imagination. The reimagining his world enables him to cope with any situation that brings about stressful social factors. Through abstraction, the researcher's film deconstructs these concepts and presents a perspective that depicts coping as his superpower. I interrogate the notion that self-identity is foundational to an individual's ability to cope. Emory is shaken by the events that have occurred. The loss of his game is likened to losing a part of himself. This Afrofuturist aspect of his identity is something that he must reclaim because it is what keeps his perception of reality in harmony. Emory is African American because there is thematic significance outside the context of the film where racial stereotypes are challenged. Furthermore, this establishes the framework for using Afrofuturism as means to subvert expectations. Statistically, multiple studies conducted by US Government Accountability Offices (GAO) revealed that African Americans receive more disciplinary action than any other groups in the US public schools. GAO reveals the factors

attributing to this phenomenon are implicit racial biases and the way adults respond to student behavior.

Emory is in casual attire because the school he attends does not enforce a strict dress code. Furthermore, he wears a bright olive-toned hoodie, his jeans are a blue wash and his shoes are off-white. His facial features are rounded. Emory's eyes are one of his most expressive features because he is soft-spoken. Often, his expressions are heightened through his eye shapes. Emory's hair is a prominent feature of his design. The round fluffy bulbs guide the viewer to one of the motifs of his character.

The thematic significance of Emory's appearance echoes his motivations as a character. His hooded sweater is a light olive hue because of the growth he experiences in his conflict. The off-white shoes indicate his character is grounded in wisdom. Emory is able to experience growth through his conflict because it is through wisdom he perceives a solution to bullying that aligns with his morals. It is not a dominant feature of his design because it is the ultimate truth that Emory grows to find by the end of the conflict. The style of his hair is indicative of a cloud to convey his sense of reverie. In addition, Emory's self-perception is heavily influenced by his imagination. Emory spends his quality time with his head in the clouds through indulging in the world he has manifested for himself. Ultimately, Emory believes he needs his game but the truth he discovers through conflict, is to be resolute about himself to be respected in any situation. Reflective of the African American experience in US public schools, Emory relies on his identity to attain self-efficacy because resulting in anything else could lead to greater consequences. Self-efficacy is the idea that an individual has a sense of control over one's outcomes. Mark Hughes States that self-identity is a major factor in how people respond to social situations. When self-efficacy is attained the individual has the capability to determine how the outcome will affect

them. Emory achieves self-efficacy through his encounter with the Garrett because of his personality. His character is calm, and his demeanor is that of a neutral disposition. In Emory's world, there is a calm yet vitalized energy about his presence. I constructed Emory's personality contrary to the stereotypes established by racial biases in the US.

The rounded features of his character are intended to highlight his sense of innocence. I decided to portray Emory in an unassuming manner in order to heighten the moment an imposing force enters his surroundings and further juxtapose the audience expectations. The game acts as a manifestation of Emory's identity which aligns with the philosophy of Afrofuturism. It is valuable to make the game an important piece of Emory's self-identity because it deconstructs the expectations of the anticipated conflict. This conflict is not about imposing forces but growing into a person that is respected because of his self-perception in the situation. Afrofuturism reimagines a world where race is not a social barrier that alienates culture. Emory is accepting himself while understanding his role in the world around him. To challenge the expectations of this moment, it is important to realize that Emory is seeking strength within himself and the game is the vehicle that leads him to his newfound understanding. His appearance is an abstraction of how he perceives his world. The story reimagines the motivations of a conflict. Emory is someone who has had the skills all along to cope because of his passion to play handheld games. This desire is not simply out of indulgence, but it is Emory's coping mechanism. He bonds himself with the game because it is a world where he can be himself. One of the foundational ideas of Afrofuturism is reimagining the outcomes of present issues. Emory's game avatar is based on the hare. Like his personality, the hare is reserved, non-confrontational, and quick. Their senses are adapted to feel the changes in

their surroundings and act swiftly. Emory wishes to resolve the confrontation without resorting to physical force.

Next, I will shift focus on the bully, Garrett. His characteristics make him the antithesis of this narrative. He takes on the mantle of Aux during the climax of the story. He is forward, blunt, and in most cases, has an inferiority complex. He often goes out of his way to leave psychological impacts on others. He has a mischievous demeanor and once he is invested in his motives, he blindly pursues his goal with little regard to how it affects others. Garrett overheard one of his peers indulging in something that piqued his interest. Garrett's decision to act on his motivations drives him to disrupt Emory's personal space. Garrett's appearance is more structured compared to Emory. He has more physical attributes that can be associated with Western audiences' expectations of masculinity in a bullying conflict. Garrett's role in the story is to act as a catalyst. He represents a hurdle for Emory to move past. Because of Garrett's skin tone, disciplinary actions statistically will not be enforced to the severity as it would towards Emory. Garrett's role as Aux, the villain of the game, is a visual representation of Emory's perception of the situation. Examining his character from an Afrofuturist perspective his thematic representation aligns with abstracting an oppressive force. Aux is an abstract representation of the acts of bullying. His attacks are visual metaphors for the actions that take place during these types of incidents. Aux represents the opposing forces of the institution Emory interacts with on a daily basis.

The film takes place in a school setting, in the hallway and a deconstructed mind space. Aux is the major element of the environment that contrasts the visual balance between shots. His colors are very minimal, and his shapes convey he has a rigid form and has affinity to the environment of the school. Garrett's affinity to the school is symbolic of public-school

institutions and represents the alienation African American adolescents experience as a result of racial biases. Emory has an affinity to the mind space as it is his conceptualization of the incident. The space is ambiguous and filled with atmospheric depth to visualize the surreal elements of Emory's experience. There is a calm flow of haze with three large mounds stylized to resemble an eight-bit game for visual contrast.

The Afrofuturist influences of Emory's conceptualized game world depict a transcendence that deconstructs the elements of the incident. These elements include verbal assault and harassment. The incident is depicted in ambiguous space because it is my goal to subvert the audience's preconceptions about bullying and focus on Emory's response to the situation.


Transcending a physical plane, adapting a new form, and embedding parts of one's cultural identity are essential components for using Afrofuturism in animation to address the encumbrances Black culture face in the United States. A blend of visual language and cinematic techniques while adapting Afrofuturistic concepts expand the temporal cinematic landscape for creating stories that contextualize black cultural identity. These techniques visualize culture as it intertwines with history. The depiction of characters transcending social issues that are not confined by the logic of reality but rather a genuine introspection expands the archetypes of black characters in animated works. Visual techniques such as obscuring the rationality of space and forms make for palatable depictions of complex topics. My film interrogates bullying in a way that subverts Western preconceptions by depicting a surreal encounter through the perspective of a highly imaginative African American boy. It is important to note that Emory's key characteristic is his sense of imagination and bringing the audience into this world keeps them aware of Emory's attitude while avoiding accepted stereotypes.

CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION

Many African Americans today, particularly, black males, are still living lives that replicate Emory's experience. For some black male adolescents, it is documented that the experience of bullying is just another way of life for them. My film portrays a conflict that contextualizes the identity of an African American boy using Afrofuturism as a conceptual framework. If animation is a cultural reflection, then it is reasonable to correlate visual storytelling as a tool to shift the attitudes of an established society. In the US, media consumption contributes to the shifting nature of culture. Afrofuturism is one of many concepts to expand the context of identity in America. The legacy of Black culture in the United States is very much a part of American culture based on historical and cultural evidence gathered for thorough analysis. Afrofuturism in my film conveys racial overtones within bullying but the underlying messages revolve around transcending Black identity beyond Western audiences' expectations. I aim to spark a conversation about the bullying situation and encourage the audiences to ponder Emory's underlying motivations.

Future Obstacles

Contemporary animated works are effective at addressing the present and my future projects aim to bring awareness of Black identity for the future of American culture. Too often, many animated works in America portray Black characters based on a token principle. Technically this is a step towards diversity but as argued by Crum, American culture will uphold Eurocentrism to maintain "Whiteness" in many disciplines (23). Animated pieces that represent Black identity in the future often serve as an index for American audiences. Series such as *The Justice League* (2001), *Teen Titans* (2003), and *Young Justice* (2010) progress the narrative of

Black identity but offer little insight for the complexity of Black cultures in the United States. The Black characters listed from these series address racialized issues while reinforcing Eurocentric values. They would sacrifice their potential for the team, go  rogue at the expense of friendships, or cause in-fighting to establish the moral compass of a group. In the end these characters always come second to the other characters. As an African American audience member, I pose two questions: Why did it have to be the Black character? Is the Black character fated to suffer the difficult choices in the future? From the Eurocentric perspective it is obvious these actions are for a good cause but from an Afrofuturist perspective, these characters actions mirror the reality of the Black experience in America today. The real challenge for storytellers is to have all cultures asking these questions to form a dialogue that accounts for the facts but reveals new truths.

Future Projects

As an African American man and storyteller in the United States it is my objective to contribute to the consciousness of Black identity in animated cinema. In addition to Afrofuturism, I aim to form a conversation on the human condition in America from a cultural perspective. Filmmakers such as Spike Lee, Jordan Peele, and LeSean Thomas have provided a standard for American audiences to become aware of Black representation in visual narratives.

My future projects include exploring the spectrum of Black identity. My projects range from documentaries exploring the mistreatment of queer Afro Latina women in medical facilities to challenging the social stigmas of the hip-hop music industries.

The documentary team I am a part of requires animated segments of anecdotes shared in patient interviews of queer Afro Latina women. Afrofuturist concepts have provided me with the level of insight to really expand the context of the issue. The perceived barriers of the

documentary project are the features of Latin culture in Brazil that are not prevalent with North American audiences. I look forward to bringing the anecdotes to life through animation because the context of these segments will move past cultural barriers. The stories told by these women are shared human experiences which further add to the depth of animation as a tool for insightful reflection on cultural experiences.

I am also planning an animated pilot for a rising musician. The goal of their brand is to bring awareness to aspects of hip-hop that edify the human experience. The series focuses on a character that has musical misadventures and must work through issues by using the powers of their trademark headband. In regard to the human experience, this project provides insight into the eccentricities of the music industry and the musical genres that are influenced on a cultural level. The underlying message the musician contends is that respect for peers, regardless of identity, creates a space where self-expression does not create schisms in the music industry.

I will continue to create stories that spark conversations that reveal the transformative nature of culture. My works will make visual impressions that encourage everyone to value cultural perspective to the same level of historical fact because the stories we share are more than a reflection of the past but projection of who we will become.

APPENDIX: COLOR SCRIPT



Figure 2 Color Script by Dana Barnes

APPENDIX: SCHOOL HALLWAY PROOF OF CONCEPT

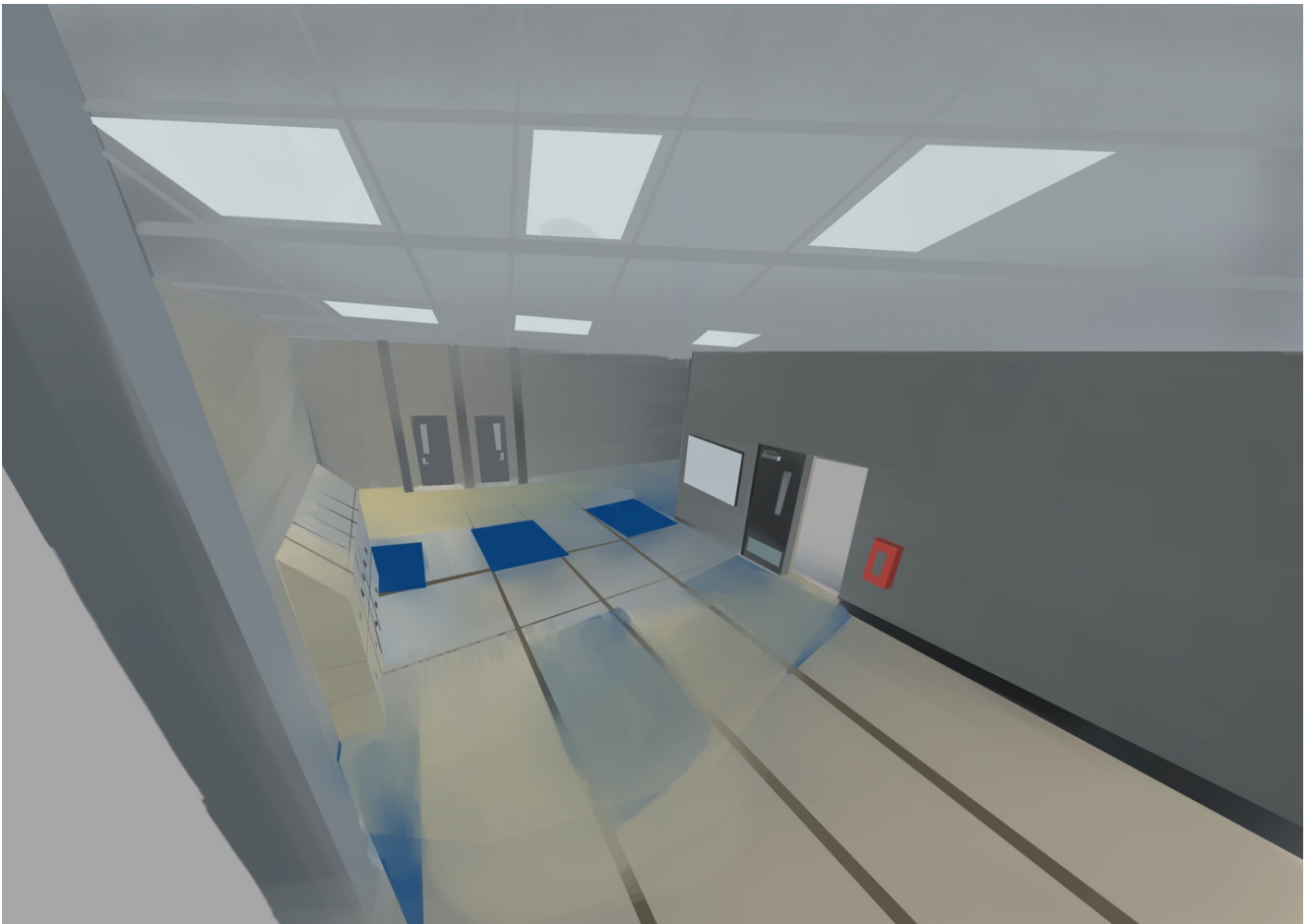


Figure 3 School Hallway Proof of Concept by Dana Barnes



Figure 4 School Hallway Proof of Concept II by Dana Barnes

APPENDIX: MINDSCAPE CONCEPT

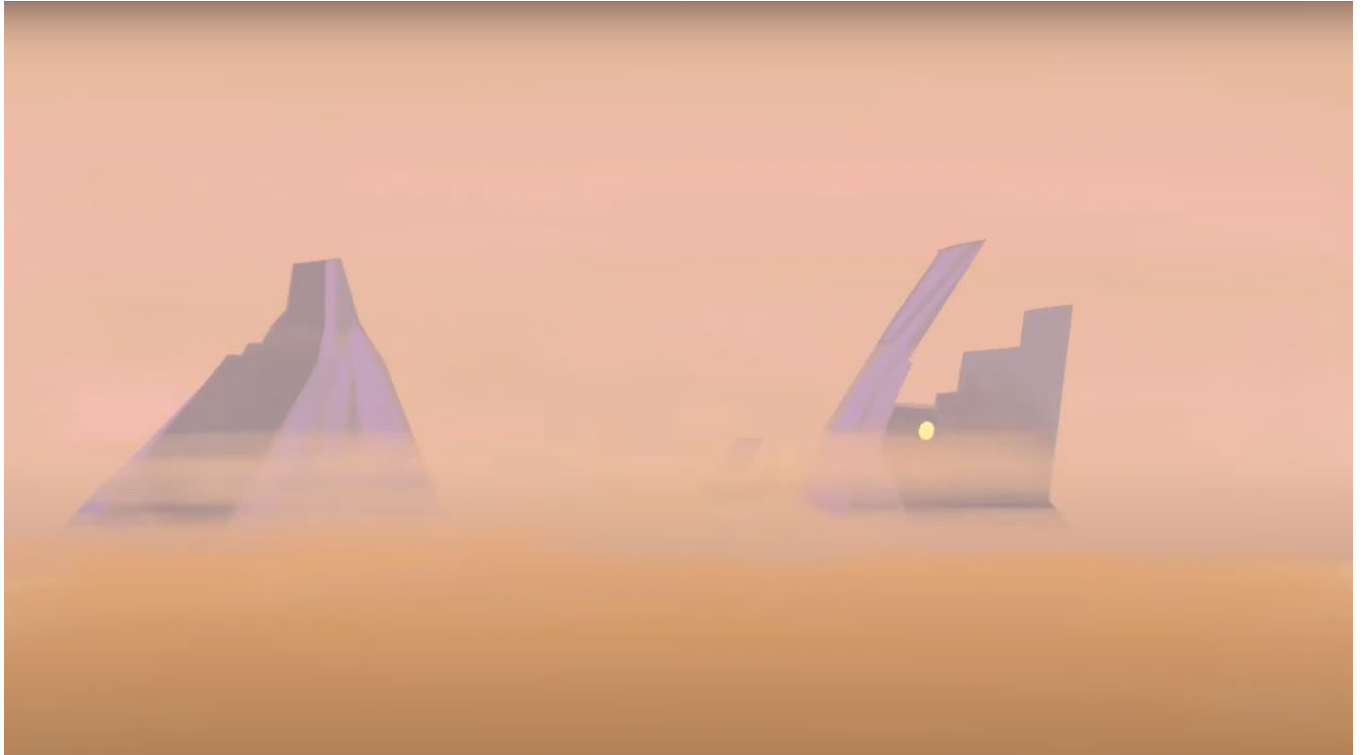


Figure 5 Mind Space Proof of Concept by Dana Barnes

APPENDIX: IMPACT FRAME



Figure 6 Impact Frame Shot 13 by Dana Barnes

APPENDIX: PRODUCTION STILLS

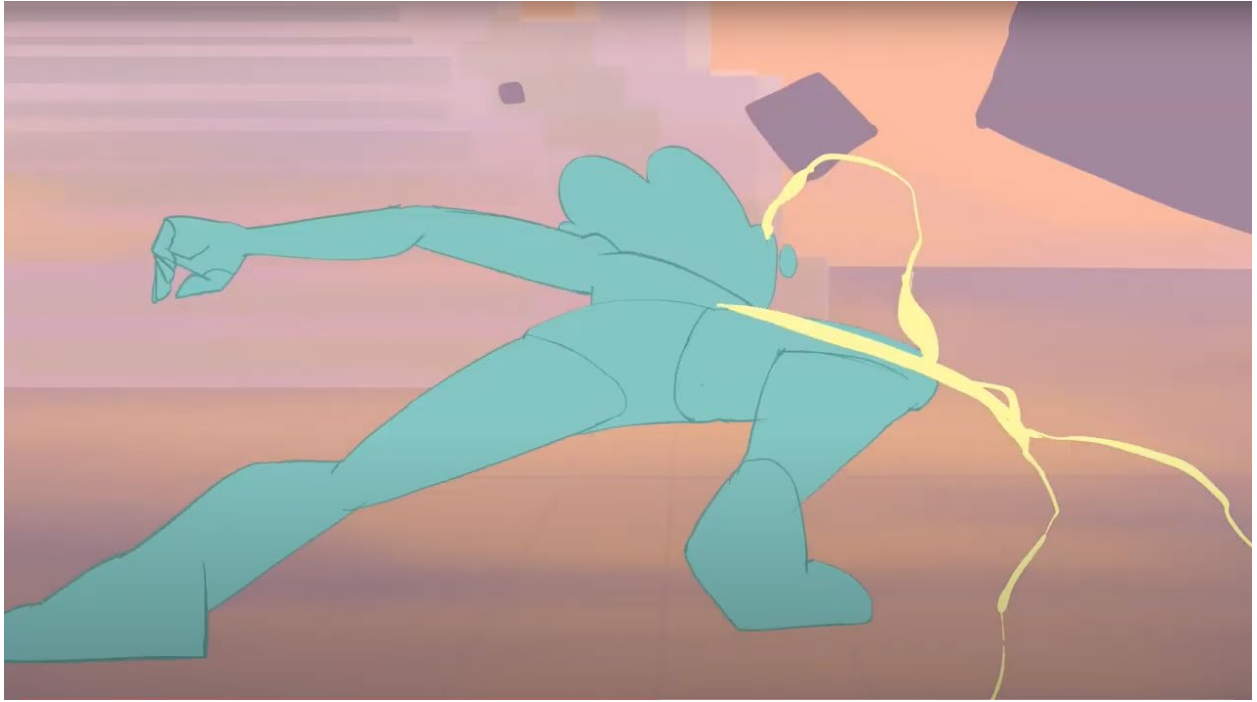


Figure 7 Production Still Shot 24 by Dana Barnes



Figure 8 Production Still Shot 32 by Dana Barnes



Figure 9 Production Still Shot 48 Dana Barnes

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