English 167C-01: “Wandering in Strange Lands”: Speculative Fiction of the Black Atlantic

Description: In a famous interview, African-American culture critic Greg Tate once remarked that “Black people live the estrangement that science fiction authors imagine”. He makes a fair point. For the black community, the devastation of one’s own society by technologically superior invaders as witnessed by the narrator of H.G. Wells’ *War of the Worlds* (1894) or the sexual coercion and forced breeding programs of Octavia Butler’s *Xenogenesis* trilogy (1987-89) present scenarios which are uncomfortably familiar when viewed in light of its own history. Perhaps it is unsurprising then, that black authors have increasingly turned to the speculative genres as a means of expressing socio-political concern and critique.

This course proposes to look at the black speculative tradition from a variety of angles. We’ll discuss how authors such as Octavia Butler and Derrick Bell use familiar science fictional conceits like encounters with the alien to uncover uncomfortable truths about racialized conflict between cultures. We’ll look at how authors such as Milton Davis and Charles Saunders reinvent existing speculative genres like steampunk and heroic fantasy within a more Afrocentric context. We’ll engage with horror fiction by black authors and what it’s doing within the conventions of that genre. And we’ll explore the ways in which more mainstream authors such as Ralph Ellison and Amiri Baraka use elements of the surreal to estrange their audiences from the more quotidian aspects of a racially unjust society and thereby more effectively call attention to them.

Course Materials:
- Pauline Hopkins: Of One Blood, Or the Hidden Self; **ISBN-10:** 0743467698
- George S. Schuyler: Black Empire; **ISBN-10:** 1555531687
- Octavia E. Butler: Bloodchild and Other Stories; **ISBN-10:** 1583226982

All other print materials not listed here will be made available online on Coursework in PDF form.

Additionally, you will be required to watch a film for class, John Sayles’ *The Brother from Another Planet* (1984). This is available for streaming on Amazon Instant Video. The link will be provided on the course web site. You are expected to come to class having already watched the film on the designated date and prepared to discuss it.

Class Requirements:

**Weekly Responses:** These should be 250-300 words (roughly 2-3 substantial paragraphs) posted on the discussion board on our Coursework site once a week. These will be due by midnight before class. Your posts should engage with at least one of the readings for the week in a meaningful way and should include some close reading of a particular passage or scene that is relevant to your point.
These don’t have to be a polished as an essay, but they should be thoughtful pieces of writing nonetheless. It might be useful to think of them as a means of testing out ideas for the final paper. These assignments will be graded on a check/check+/check- basis.

**Write Your Own Afrofuturist Story:** This assignment has two parts. First, you will write your own Afrofuturist story of 1200-1500 words (about 4-6 pages), which riffs on the thematic content and genre elements of the works we’ve read for class. It can be a science fiction, fantasy, or horror narrative, or some combination thereof. Second, and more important from a grading standpoint, will require you to write a critical analysis of your story of about 600-800 words (2-3 pages), using what you’ve learned about close reading as well as the formal aspects unique to speculative fiction.

**Final Paper:** This assignment will allow you to explore the course themes in greater depth than the shorter assignments. It should be about 2000-2500 words (roughly 8-10 pages) and can be about one of the assigned works from class or about another topic of your own choosing, provided it is suitably related to the course thematic. All paper topics must be approved by me first, but there is plenty of room to make this assignment your own.

**Policies Regarding Assignments:**

Papers are due to me on the dates listed on the syllabus before the start of class. If I do not receive your assignment before then, it is officially late and appropriate penalties will accrue.

For the story assignment, I expect you to bring three copies to class for small group work, in addition to an electronic copy in my inbox.

**Grade Breakdown:**

Eight Weekly Online Responses: 20%
Write Your Own Afrofuturist Story Assignment: 30%
Final Paper: 40%
Attendance/Participation: 10%**

If you need an extension on an assignment, contact me at least 3 days in advance. Late submissions incur a 1/3-grade deduction per day (e.g., A- to B+, B+ to B).

**Notes on Attendance and Participation:**

- “Participation” means more than just talking in seminar discussions. If, for whatever reason, you don’t feel comfortable speaking up in class, rest assured that there are other ways to participate *constructively*. In-class writing exercises, small group work, and helpful feedback towards your peers are equally important contributions you can make in class. They definitely will be noticed and rewarded appropriately.

- Note the emphasis on the word “constructively” in the last bullet point. Rude or abusive behavior towards me or your peers will not be tolerated and will count against you. Seriously, don’t be that guy (or gal).
Attendance and Participation in seminar discussions are mandatory. If you need to miss a class for religious holidays, school activities, illness, or emergencies, please let me know as soon as you can. All other absences will count as unexcused and repeated lateness or absenteeism will negatively impact your grade. You are expected to be an active participant in class discussions.

Students with Documented Disabilities
Students who may need an academic accommodation based on the impact of a disability must initiate the request with the Office of Accessible Education (OAE). Professional staff will evaluate the request with required documentation, recommend reasonable accommodations, and prepare an Accommodation Letter for faculty dated in the current quarter in which the request is being made. Students should contact the OAE as soon as possible since timely notice is needed to coordinate accommodations. The OAE is located at 563 Salvatierra Walk (phone: 723-1066, URL: http://studentaffairs.stanford.edu/oae).

Honor Code
The Honor Code is the University's statement on academic integrity written by students in 1921. It articulates University expectations of students and faculty in establishing and maintaining the highest standards in academic work:

The Honor Code is an undertaking of the students, individually and collectively:

1. That they will not give or receive aid in examinations; that they will not give or receive unpermitted aid in class work, in the preparation of reports, or in any other work that is to be used by the instructor as the basis of grading.
2. That they will do their share and take an active part in seeing to it that others as well as themselves uphold the spirit and letter of the Honor Code.
3. The faculty on its part manifests its confidence in the honor of its students by refraining from proctoring examinations and from taking unusual and unreasonable precautions to prevent the forms of dishonesty mentioned above. The faculty will also avoid, as far as practicable, academic procedures that create temptations to violate the Honor Code.
4. While the faculty alone has the right and obligation to set academic requirements, the students and faculty will work together to establish optimal conditions for honorable academic work.

Class Policies
- You may address me as Andrew.
- Laptops, iPads, and e-readers are all permitted for the purpose of note taking and consulting readings. Recreational uses of technology, such as texting, talking on the phone, checking social media, or cruising YouTube, are not. I like to walk and talk while teaching, so there’s a good chance I’ll know if you’re breaking this rule.
- Eating full meals in class can be fairly disruptive. Light snacks and drinks are fine, as long as you clean up after yourselves.

Week 1: Introductions
- June 20: Introductions; Darko Suvin, “On the Poetics of the Science Fiction Genre” (in class)
Week 2: Strange Matings
- June 29: Nalo Hopkinson: “Greedy Choke Puppy” and “The Glass Bottle Trick” from Skin Folk (2001)

Week 3: Back to Africa
- July 4: No Class
- July 6: Pauline Hopkins, Of One Blood: Chapters 1-9 (1903)

Week 4: Back to Africa (cont’d)
- July 11: Hopkins, Of One Blood: Chapters 10-16 (cont’d)
- July 13: Hopkins, Of One Blood (finish); Write Your Own Afrofuturist Story assignment due.

Week 5: Resistance and Revolution
- July 18: George Schuyler, “The Black Internationale” (1936-37) : pgs 3-75 from Black Empire
- July 20: Schuyler, “The Black Internationale” (finish)

Week 6: Allegories of Race
- July 25: Ralph Ellison, selections from Invisible Man (1952); Lisa Yaszek, “An Afrofuturist Reading of Ralph Ellison’s Invisible Man” (2005)

Week 7: Remixed History
- August 3: Milton Davis, “Rite of Passage” from Steamfunk! (2011)

Week 8: Space is the Place

Final Paper Due: Sunday, August 14, 2016 by noon