

Exhibition Resource Guide

WOMEN OF AFROFUTURISM

Extended Labels for Literature, Historic Figures,
and Recording Artists Sections

Octavia E. Butler: Mother of Afrofuturism

Octavia E. Butler (1947–2006), the first African American woman science fiction writer to gain national recognition, redefined the genre and penned some of the earliest Afrofuturist novels that featured Black female protagonists. Butler paved the way for Black women writing under the larger umbrella of speculative fiction today, including authors such as N. K. Jemisin, Nnedi Okorafor, Nalo Hopkinson, and Tananarive Due. Butler grew up in Pasadena, California, and spent most of her time in the library. Her mother, a single parent, encouraged her daughter to write by gifting her a typewriter for her eleventh birthday. Butler began submitting stories to science fiction magazines at age thirteen. After attending Pasadena City College, in 1970, she participated in the Clarion Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers' Workshop in Pennsylvania as the only Black student. Early in Butler's career, she often awoke at two or three in the morning to write before leaving for work in clerical or factory positions. She published her first novel, *Patternmaster*, in 1976, which was followed by *Mind of My Mind* in 1977. By this time, she made her living through writing alone. Butler won both Hugo and Nebula awards for her science fiction and was awarded a MacArthur Fellowship in 1995. In 1993, Butler published *Parable of the Sower*, arguably her most revered novel, which has influenced countless Black women writers, artists, and filmmakers. The sequel, *Parable of the Talents*, followed in 1998.

[wall portrait]

Octavia E. Butler 2024

Artwork by Nettrice Gaskins (b. 1970)

Tools applied: Generative AI (text-2-image and neural style transfer) and

Adobe Photoshop

Courtesy of the artist

R2025.0204.002

1 Aztec 600 typewriter 1961

VEB Büromaschinenwerk Rheinmetall

Sömmerda, East Germany

Collection of the Museum of American Heritage

100.22.26

L2025.0207.001

2 *Wild Seed* 1988

first published 1980

Octavia E. Butler

Popular Library

Collection of M.F. Westphal

L2025.0201.002

3 *Parable of the Sower: A Graphic Novel Adaptation* 2020

Octavia E. Butler

adapted by Damian Duffy | Artwork: John Jennings

Harry N. Abrams

Collection of M.F. Westphal

L2025.0201.001

4 *Parable of the Talents* 2019

first published 1998

Octavia E. Butler

Seven Stories Press

anonymous lender

L2025.0208.008c

Set in 2024–27, Octavia Butler's *Parable* series, which debuted in 1993, appears prescient today. It follows Lauren Oya Olamina as a teenager and later an adult as she faces a post-apocalyptic California ravaged by climate, political, and social crisis. Olamina suffers from hyper-empathy syndrome, which allows her to feel the pain of others. When her gated community is destroyed, Olamina sets out to create a new community called Earthseed.

5 *Brown Girl in the Ring* 1998

Nalo Hopkinson

Warner Books

anonymous lender

L2025.0208.009

Jamaican-born Canadian author Nalo Hopkinson often draws upon Caribbean culture in her speculative fiction. Her first novel *Brown Girl in the Ring* is set in a dystopian Toronto. Hopkinson currently teaches at the School of Creative Writing at the University of British Columbia.

6 *How Long 'til Black Future Month?* 2018

N. K. Jemisin

Orbit Books

anonymous lender

L2025.0208.012

Internationally acclaimed author and MacArthur Fellow N. K. Jemisin has sold over two million copies of her *Broken Earth* trilogy. She has received multiple accolades for her work, including receiving three consecutive Hugo Awards for the series. *How Long 'til Black Future Month?* is her only published collection of short stories. *Far Sector* is the prolific writer's first foray into comic book writing.

7 *Binti* 2018

first published 2015
Nnedi Okorafor
Tordotcom
anonymous lender
L2025.0208.010

Binti is Nigerian American author Nnedi Okorafor's first story set in space. Okorafor explores Africanfuturism, a subcategory of science fiction rooted in African culture, history, and mythology; and Africanjujuism, a division of fantasy that combines existing African spiritualities and cosmologies with the imaginative. She received Hugo and Nebula awards for *Binti* and a World Fantasy Award for *Who Fears Death* (2011).

8 *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture* 2013

Ytasha L. Womack
Lawrence Hill Books
Collection of M.F. Westphal
L2025.0201.003

Critically acclaimed author, dancer, filmmaker, and independent scholar Ytasha L. Womack wrote the essential introduction to Afrofuturism; it remains an integral primer on the movement. She recently released *The Afrofuturist Evolution: Creative Paths to Self-Discovery* (2025) and co-wrote the film *Niyah and the Multiverse*.

9 *Far Sector No. 1* 2019

Author: N. K. Jemisin | Artwork: Jamal Campbell
DC Comics
anonymous lender
L2025.0208.001

10 *Black Panther: World of Wakanda No. 1* 2016

Authors: Ta-Nehisi Coates, Roxane Gay, Yona Harvey | Artwork: Alitha E. Martinez, Afua Richardson (Cover)
Marvel Comics
anonymous lender
L2025.0208.002

A spinoff of *Black Panther*, *World of Wakanda* was published in a series of six—the premiere Marvel comic book to feature a team of Black female writers and artists. Alitha E. Martinez, the first Black woman artist to illustrate for Marvel and DC Comics, completed most of the interior artwork. Illustrator Afua Richardson created the cover. Author Roxane Gay primarily wrote the story with contributions by poet Yona Harvey. The story follows Ayo and Aneka, two lovers and members of the Dora Milaje, the Black Panthers' special female forces.

11 *Ironheart Vol. 1: Those With Courage* 2019

Author: Eve Ewing | Artwork: Kevin Libranda, Amy Reeder (Cover)

Marvel Comics

anonymous lender

L2025.0208.011

Marvel Comics' *Ironheart* details the adventures of superhero Riri Williams, a Black teen girl from Chicago. An author and professor at the University of Chicago, Eve Ewing began writing the series in 2018. She has also served as a contributing author to the *Black Panther* series and *Exceptional X-Men*.

For an exhaustive list of Afrofuturist literature and Black speculative fiction, please visit: sistahscifi.com. The brainchild of Isis Asare, it is the first Black-owned bookstore focusing on science fiction and fantasy in the United States.

Nettrice Gaskins

Based in Boston, Dr. Nettrice Gaskins is a digital artist, teacher, writer, and STEAM (science, technology, engineering, art, and math) advocate who earned a BFA in Computer Graphics, an MFA in Art and Technology, and a PhD in Digital Media from the Georgia Institute of Technology. Gaskins' mother worked as a computer programmer/analyst during the 1980s, when few Black women worked in the field. Gaskins is a 2021 Ford Global Fellow and currently the assistant director of the Lesley STEAM Learning Lab at Lesley University. Gaskins' book, *Techno-Vernacular Creativity and Innovation* (2021) proposes a novel approach to STEAM learning that engages historically marginalized communities. Gaskins has taught creative artificial intelligence (AI), robotics, multimedia, visual art, and computer science courses.

“Afrofuturism invites us to imagine new possibilities and futures, often by exploring alternative systems and technologies. This aligns with the potential of generative AI that encourages artists to take risks” explains Gaskins. “My work explores human imagination and software algorithms to produce visuals that open new possibilities for creative expression.” As an artist, she embeds her cultural background, art knowledge, and personal experiences into the tools and prompts she uses to generate images. Gaskins believes “what people misunderstand is how the current tools, in the hands of experienced digital artists, can be used to create new artworks...My intention is to go beyond what human hands can do.” In 2021, Gaskins exhibited a portrait series of eleven “Featured Futurists” as part of the Smithsonian’s *Futures* exhibition. Gaskins’ portraits of Greg Tate and Faith Ringgold have been displayed as outdoor murals at the Museum of Contemporary African Diasporan Arts in Brooklyn, New York.

[label image]

Nettrice Gaskins Self-Portrait 2021

Artwork by Nettrice Gaskins (b. 1970)

Tools applied: Generative AI (neural style transfer)

Courtesy of the artist

R2025.0204.008

[wall portrait top]

Katherine Johnson 2024

Artwork by Nettrice Gaskins (b. 1970)

Tools applied: Generative AI (text-2-image)

Courtesy of the artist

R2025.0204.005

Throughout World War II and into the Space Race of the late 1950s and '60s, mechanical calculators and slide rules aided “human computers” whose calculations contributed to groundbreaking projects. NASA’s Langley Research Center employed hundreds of

female computers from the mid-1930s to the '70s. During the 1940s, Langley began recruiting African American women. Katherine Johnson (1918–2020) joined the "West Area Computing" unit, an all-Black group of female mathematicians, in 1953. Johnson contributed to many of NASA's explorations, including calculating orbital equations for astronaut John Glenn, the first American to orbit the Earth, in 1962.

[wall portrait center]

Lt. Uhura (Nichelle Nichols) 2024

Artwork by Nettrice Gaskins (b. 1970)

Tools applied: Generative AI (text-2-image and neural style transfer),

Adobe Photoshop, and pencil sketch

Courtesy of the artist

R2025.0204.004

Nichelle Nichols (1932–2022) played the role of Lt. Uhura, the communications officer on the original *Star Trek* series, which aired on television from 1966–69. One of the first instances an African American woman played a significant role on screen, her pivotal performance inspired generations of women of color. When Nichols pondered leaving *Star Trek* for a career on Broadway, Martin Luther King, Jr. implored her to remain on the show to continue to serve as a role model for Black viewers. In 1977, NASA invited Nichols to appear as a spokesperson to help recruit women and minorities to apply to its Space Shuttle program.

[wall portrait bottom]

Mae Jemison 2024

Artwork by Nettrice Gaskins (b. 1970)

Tools applied: Generative AI (text-2-image)

Courtesy of the artist

R2025.0204.003

Mae C. Jemison (b. 1956) once stated: "Sometimes people want to limit you because of their own limited imaginations." But Jemison's unlimited imagination led her to believe she would travel to space one day. At age sixteen, Jemison began studying chemical engineering and African American Studies at Stanford University; after graduating, she earned a medical degree from Cornell University. Jemison served as a doctor in the Peace Corps in Liberia and Sierra Leone before applying to NASA. In 1987, she became the first Black woman to join NASA's astronaut training program, and in 1992, she was the first Black woman to rocket into space on the Space Shuttle Endeavour.

12 JVC 3241 Videosphere television 1970s

Victor Company of Japan, Ltd.

Yokohama, Japan

Courtesy of Matthew Householder

L2025.0206.002

13 AFRIFUTURI 02022020 2020

D. Denenge Duyst-Akpem
self-published
Courtesy of the artist
L2025.0205.002

One of the first professors of Afrofuturism, D. Denenge Duyst-Akpem's self-published artist's book reflects her long journey exploring the Afrofuture. It features eight performance costumes from past exhibitions and eight musings: academic papers, performance scripts, poetic essays, a recipe, and custom holographic elements.

14 Record holder with Grace Jones *Portfolio* album 1977

anonymous lenders
L2025.0211.001, .0208.014

Jamaican-born model, actress, and singer Grace Jones defied gender norms with her androgynous, self-confident stance.

15 Record player with stand 1970s

Electrohome
Canada
Courtesy of Matthew Householder
L2025.0206.001a,b

Listen along to our [Spotify playlist](#), which features the recording artists highlighted in this exhibition.

Alice Coltrane: Music as Transformation

For composer Alice Coltrane (1937–2007), Afrofuturist interest in alternative realities resonated with the transformative power of music. In 1967, at age twenty-nine, the jazz pianist, organist, harpist, and singer lost her husband and musical partner, renowned saxophonist John Coltrane (1926–67). Left with four children to raise, Alice went on a deep spiritual journey to overcome her grief and consulted with the guru, Swami Satchidananda. In 1971, Alice released *Journey in Satchidananda*, the first musical manifestation of her spiritual transformation. Soon after, she visited India. She moved to California in the early 1970s, and in 1975, established the Vedantic Center in Woodland Hills. In 1976, she had a revelation and renounced secular life, becoming a swamini, or spiritual teacher, and taking the name Turiyasangitananda, which she translated as the Transcendental Lord's highest song of bliss. In 1983, Alice founded the Shanti Anantam Ashram (later renamed Sai Anantam Ashram) in Agoura Hills, California. The multi-ethnic and multigenerational ashram served as a sanctuary for many prior to closing in 2017. Music served as the center of Alice's practice; she brought together diverse styles and cultural traditions. In addition to releasing albums in the 1970s, Alice independently distributed live cassette recordings of devotional hymns. The recordings evoke a soulful, Black gospel sound, reflective of Alice's upbringing performing in Detroit's Black churches. Alice continually expressed her beliefs in a "universal consciousness" and felt that "absolute consciousness" or "self-realization" was possible on Earth.

[wall portrait]

Alice Coltrane 2024

Artwork by Nettrice Gaskins (b. 1970)

Tools applied: Generative AI (text-2-image and neural style transfer)

Courtesy of the artist

R2025.0204.001

16 *New Amerykah Part Two: Return of the Ankh*

reissue 2022 | originally released 2010

Erykah Badu

Motown

anonymous lender

L2025.0208.003

Non-conformist Erykah Badu, who released her first album *Baduizm* in 1997, appears on the cover of *New Amerykah Part Two* as a cyborg goddess immersed in nature; a tree of life and mystical version of Badu emerges from her scalp.

17 *Spirituals* 2022

Santigold
Little Jerk Records
anonymous lender
L2025.0208.004

Genre-defying “Indie” star Santigold’s *Spirituals* was inspired in part by religious folk songs sung by enslaved African Americans. She explains in an interview how the songs allowed people to transcend their circumstances and “experience joy and freedom when there was none visibly around them.”

18 *Mandorla Awakening II: Emerging Worlds* 2017

Nicole Mitchell
FPE Records
anonymous lender
L2025.0208.007

Influenced by author Octavia Butler, jazz flutist Nicole Mitchell’s *Mandorla Awakening* was recorded at Chicago’s Museum of Contemporary Art. It employs science fiction to pose the question, “What would a world look like that is truly egalitarian, with advanced technology that is in tune with nature?”

19 *Circuit City* 2020

Moor Mother
Don Giovanni Records
anonymous lender
L2025.0208.006

Philadelphia-based poet, musician, and activist Camae Ayewa, known as Moor Mother, released *Circuit City* in 2020. Part spoken word, part experimental noise music, it tackles critical issues, including redlining or racial housing-based discrimination and generational trauma. Moor Mother is also part of the artistic collective, Black Quantum Futurism with artist, author, community activist, and lawyer Rasheedah Phillips.

20 *Nightbirds* 1974

Labelle
Epic
Courtesy of The Stacks Record Shop
L2025.0209.001

Nona Hendryx, a founding member of the pop group Labelle—the first Black female vocalist group to appear on the cover of *Rolling Stone* in 1975—was fascinated with science, astronomy, and space travel. After she joined Labelle

her interest in space and technology continued. She wrote songs such as “Space Children” and “Cosmic Dancer” and embraced a space-age look for live stage performances.

21 *The ArchAndroid* 2010

Janelle Monáe

Bad Boy Entertainment, Wondaland

anonymous lender

L2025.0208.005

Janelle Monáe’s debut album *The ArchAndroid* takes place in 2719 and stars an android who must avoid disassembly after falling in love with a human. Since then, Monáe has remained a prominent figure in Afrofuturism, releasing *Dirty Computer* and its accompanying film in 2018.

22 *They Say I'm Different* 1974

Betty Davis

Just Sunshine Records

Courtesy of Mickey McGowan/Unknown Museum Archives

L2025.0210.001

An artist ahead of her time, Betty Davis (1945–2022) appears in a futuristic ensemble on the cover of her 1974 album, *They Say I'm Different*. Her powerful, unapologetic song lyrics and stage performances, and her refusal to submit to censorship, resulted in her being dropped from her record label in 1976.

23 *Universal Consciousness* 1971

Alice Coltrane

Impulse! | ABC Records

Courtesy of Mickey McGowan/Unknown Museum Archives

L2025.0210.003

24 *Journey in Satchidananda* 1971

Alice Coltrane

Impulse! | ABC Records

Courtesy of Mickey McGowan/Unknown Museum Archives

L2025.0210.002

25 *World Galaxy* 1972

Alice Coltrane

Impulse! | ABC Records

Courtesy of Mickey McGowan/Unknown Museum Archives

L2025.0210.004