

IN THEIR OWN FORM

Contemporary Photography
+ Afrofuturism

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MoCP
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Contemporary Photography

Columbia
COLLEGE CHICAGO

This guide serves as a viewer's supplement to the exhibition *In Their Own Form* and contains information about the works on view, questions for looking and discussion, and suggested readings.

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Mohau Modisakeng, *Endabeni I*, 2015



Teju Cole, *Brazzaville, February 2013, 2017, 2017*

**“Here is the Anti-Slave...
now let them emerge, clothed
and in their own form.”**

Ralph Waldo Emerson, First Draft of “Emancipation of the Negroes in the West Indies,” 1844



Fabrice Monteiro, *The Prophecy Untitled #2*, 2013



Alexis Peskine, *Aljana Moons-Twins Carriage*, 2015

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In Their Own Form

Frederick Douglass, fugitive slave, activist, famed author, and orator of the nineteenth century, had a deep and abiding interest in the era's new and burgeoning medium of photography. The most photographed American of his time, Douglass strategically used photographs of himself to advance his anti-slavery message. With a wholehearted belief in the unique power of photography to capture the humanity of black people in the United States, he used the medium to counteract prevalent stereotypical portrayals such as *Sambo* and *Mammy* figures.¹

Through consistent dissemination of his own image, Douglass highlighted his and other black people's subjectivity. This exercise, the constant manipulation of his likeness achieved by posing for hundreds of photos, captured by the best practitioners of the time, not only functioned as a more truthful representation of people of African descent, but also as political tactic. Douglass's contemporary and fellow anti-slavery supporter Ralph Waldo Emerson further explored this idea in his essay "Emancipation of the Negroes in the West Indies" (1844):

So now it seems to me that the arrival of such men as Toussaint if he is pure blood or Douglass, if he is pure blood, outweighs all the English and American humanity. The Antislavery of the whole world is but dust in the balance, a poor squeamishness and nervousness; the might and the right are here. Here is the Anti-Slave . . . now let them emerge clothed and in their own form²

The above passage, which inspired the title of this exhibition, uniquely emphasizes the importance of subjectivity and representation expressly present in photography. Although explored in new and exciting ways with the emergence of early photography, subjectivity and representation, both recurring themes in contemporary forms of the medium, have the power to illuminate the seemingly unending and daunting task of opposing the exhaustive number of negative portrayals of black people in mass media.

Writer Celeste-Marie Bernier explains, "For Douglass, photography was the lifeblood of being able to be seen and not caricatured, to be represented and not grotesque, to be seen as fully human and not as an

object or chattel to be bought and sold."³ This sense of photography's authenticity still rings true today, as the power to present oneself in one's own form is as necessary now as it was in the antebellum United States of America. By reimagining the power of photography and dignified images of black Americans, Douglass used imagination as resistance. A gifted writer, Douglass also explored themes of speculative futures and alternative realities in his sole fiction work, *The Heroic Slave* (1852). Here we can assert that Douglass contributed to proto-Afrofuturist ideas.⁴

Coined in the early 1990s by author and cultural critic Mark Dery, the term *Afrofuturism* is a movement, a concept, that combines elements of non-Western mythologies, specifically Egyptian, Afrocentrism, mysticism, science fiction, technology, music, poetry, and other forms of media. Although further popularized in the 1990s, with the influx of cultural studies and race theory, Afrofuturism has roots that can be traced to early black liberators such as W. E. B. DuBois. Like Douglass, DuBois expounded upon the fragmented identities of African Americans—through both his theory of Double Consciousness and his early writings on black speculative fiction in his lesser known science-fiction short story "The Comet" (1920). Similarly, Ralph Ellison's 1952 novel *Invisible Man* explores alternative realities and black existentialism also found within the movement. Additional contributors to Afrofuturist ideals include the prolific jazz musician Sun Ra, famed science-fiction writers Octavia Butler and Nalo Hopkinson, and visual artists Krista Franklin and Rhonda Wheatley, among others.

Both simultaneously steeped in history and undeniably timely, the acts of looking forward and backward, collectively, reflect the Afrofuturist movement. Scholar Alondra Nelson says Afrofuturism is also about "speculation and utopia—part of the resilience of Black culture and Black life is about imagining the impossible, imaging a better place, a different world."⁵ Juxtaposing Douglass's views on the power of photography, his success in reframing his image, and skill for challenging the proposed futures of black Americans, with the work of contemporary photographers aiming to define themselves in light of ties to one's history, extraordinarily presents the chance to re-vision their speculative futures.

Mohau Modisakeng (South African, b. 1986), Mary Sibande (South African, b. 1982), and Kudzanai Chiurai (Zimbabwean, b. 1981) examine collective memory, personal memory, and complex histories. Modisakeng's *Endebeni 1* (2015) merges self-portraiture with past and present aesthetics against a stark background. His immersive film *Passages* (2017) investigates the effects of the transatlantic slave trade. Sibande's *A Terrible Beauty* (2013) refers to a 1989 protest in South Africa where anti-apartheid supporters were sprayed with purple dye for easy identification later. Chiurai's *We Live in Silence III* (2017) challenges the dominant colonial narrative.

Fabrice Monteiro (Belgian, b. 1972), Jim Chuchu (Kenyan, b. 1982), and Aida Muluneh (Ethiopian, b. 1974) explore post-human and post-apocalyptic entities. Monteiro's *The Prophecy* (2014) series expresses the grave future of environmental pollution in Senegal; Chuchu's *Pagans* (2014) presents the timelessness of otherworldly ancient African deities; and Muluneh's Surrealist imagery from her *The World is 9* (2016) series reflects a deeply personal connection to time and space.

Zanele Muholi (South African, b. 1972), Ayana V. Jackson (American, b. 1977), Paulo Nazareth (Brazilian, b. 1977), and Zohra Opoku (German, b. 1977) connect the self, origin, and time in their works. Muholi's self-portraits consider the complexity of her identity as a queer, African woman. Opoku's *Rhododendron* (2015) investigates traditional African spirituality and familial relationships as well as her identity as a Ghanaian-German woman. Jackson's *The Becoming Subject* (2015) series grapples with the complicated histories of black identity and of photography. Nazareth's *Untitled For Sale* (2011) series and *Untitled, Objects to Keep the Sun Out of Your Eyes* (2010) excavate the racial, religious, and philosophical hybridization of his native Brazil.

Alun Be (Senegalese, b. 1981) and Alexis Peskine (French, b. 1979) explore the role of Afro-diasporic generations traversing a very contemporary present. Peskine's *Aljana Moons* (2015) series investigates black masculinity through personal and collective African diasporic experience. In his *Edification* (2017) series Be captures the societal impact of technology and challenges typical depictions of Africa.

And finally, Teju Cole (American, b. 1975) merges text and image to analyze memory. In *Black Paper* (2017), Cole presents a visceral response to our present experiences, specifically the November 2016 US election.

Speculative futures, coping with the past as a means of navigating the present, and re-imagining the future are themes deeply entrenched within the Afrofuturist movement and recur in each artists' work. In his foundational text *Black to the Future: Interviews with Samuel Delany, Greg Tate and Tricia Rose*, Mark Dery poses the question "Can a community whose past has deliberately been rubbed out, and whose energies have subsequently been consumed by the search for legible traces of its history, imagine possible futures?"⁶ *In Their Own Form* is a collection of thirty-plus works by thirteen artists who contemplate their pasts—and in the process grapple with their possible futures.

Sheridan Tucker Anderson

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Notes

1. Henry Louis Gates, "Frederick Douglass's Camera Obscura: Representing the Antislave 'Clothed and in Their Own Form,'" *Critical Inquiry* 42, no.1 (Autumn 2015): pp. 31–60. <https://doi.org/10.1086/682995>.
2. Ralph Waldo Emerson, quoted in Gates, "Frederick Douglass's Camera Obscura," p. 31.
3. Celeste-Marie Bernier and Bill E. Lawson, *Pictures and Power: Imaging and Imagining Frederick Douglass 1818–2018* (Liverpool University Press, 2017), pp. 51–55.
4. Juliet Hooker, *Theorizing Race in the Americas: Douglass, Sarmiento, Du Bois, and Vasconcelos* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), pp. 110–15.
5. Reynaldo Anderson and Charles E. Jones, eds., *Afrofuturism 2.0: The Rise of Astro-Blackness* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2016), pp. 95–97.
6. Mark Dery, "Black to the Future," *Flame Wars* (Jan. 2012): pp. 179–222. <https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822396765-010>.

Afrofuturism is a cross-disciplinary genre, including music, film, visual art, poetry, and performance, that envisions an alternative reality to offset the embattled past, present, and potential future of people of African descent throughout the globe. Afrofuturism embraces the sense of alienation that comes with being transported from one's home country to a foreign land while also envisioning utopian possibilities. Select themes of Afrofuturism include **technology, science fiction, escapism, time travel, and fantasy.**

In February of 2018 Carvel Wallace wrote for the *New York Times Magazine*:

“The artistic movement called Afrofuturism, a decidedly black creation, is meant to go far beyond the limitations of the white imagination. It isn't just the idea that black people will exist in the future, will use technology and science, will travel deep into space. It is the idea that we will have won the future. There exists, somewhere within us, an image in which we are whole, in which we are home. Afrofuturism is, if nothing else, an attempt to imagine what that home would be.”¹

AFROFUTURISM BEYOND THE EXHIBITION

One of the early pioneers of Afrofuturism is **Sun Ra** (1914–1993), an experimental jazz musician and poet who blended traditional African motifs with futuristic elements and experimental music. Sun Ra believed he was an alien from Saturn whose mission on Earth was to promote peace. From 1945–1961 he lived in Chicago, becoming involved with the city's civil rights movement and black nationalism. While in Chicago, Sun Ra also changed his name from Herman Poole Blount to Le Sony'r Ra, declaring a fresh identity and shedding his slave-burdened family name.



This video is a selection from the 1974 feature-length film, *Space Is the Place*, which portrays Sun Ra's vision of transporting communities to a new planet with the goal of creating a home for the black population.

¹ Carvel Wallace, February 21, 2018, The New York Times Magazine, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/12/magazine/why-black-panther-is-a-defining-moment-for-black-america.html>

Alun Be

Alun Be's *Edification* series (2017) imagines the future role of **technology** in Africa and ways it can be used to advance society. His images picture an undetermined time in the near or distant future in which humans cover their faces almost entirely with a screen or lens to view and interact with the world. Young people are used as models in the series, picturing the next generation's claim on and ideals for the future.



Alun Be, *Potentiality*, 2017

Aida Muluneh

Ethiopian-born artist **Aida Muluneh**'s work considers the role of **time**, literally and metaphorically, in relation to Ethiopia's history and her own future as an African woman. This image, titled *Dinknesh Part Three* (2016), references the 3.2 million-year-old skeleton—the oldest human fossils found to date—which was discovered in Ethiopia in 1974. The skeleton was named Dinknesh, which means “you are marvelous” in Ethiopia's official language, Amharic, but is more commonly known around the globe as Lucy. The notion of looking forward and backward, collectively at our past, as a means of re-imagining our futures are themes deeply entrenched within the Afrofuturist movement and are evident in both Be and Muluneh's works here.



Aida Muluneh, *Dinknesh Part Three*, 2016

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade occurred for over 300 years in which 12–15 million people were forcibly migrated from Africa to the Western Hemisphere. An estimated 1.2–2.4 million people died en route, but the complete death toll is not documented. Slave trade to the United States began in 1581 in Florida and did not conclude until 1807, though illegal trading continued for nearly 60 more years.

Mohau Modisakeng

Mohau Modisakeng's immersive film *Passages* (2017) also addresses **time** in relation to the black experience. Modisakeng examines the multi-generational effects of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade and the fracturing of cultural identity that occurred when Africans were separated from their continent. The three-channel film surrounds the viewer with images of three individuals on a boat as they begin to sink into the water. The subjects flail their arms, struggling to keep afloat, while also moving with precise control, as if in a choreographed dance between both sides of the Atlantic.



Mohau Modisakeng, *Passages*, 2017

FURTHER CONTEXT

African Diaspora refers to the global movement and migration of people of African descent, largely due to the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade. The most common nations now home to people of African descent are Brazil (55 million), the United States (46 million), Haiti (10 million), and the Dominican Republic (9 million), but also include significant populations in many more countries including France, Mexico, Canada, and Italy.

Paulo Nazareth

Paulo Nazareth's work investigates his identity as a Brazilian of African and indigenous descent through performance, installations, and photography. This series of self-portraits, titled *Para Venda (For Sale)* (2010), considers the transit of his ancestors to Brazil during the slave trade and its residual effects on his identity and **sense of estrangement**. The skull prompts contemplation of the lives lost in transit while also potentially serving as a metaphor for his own sense of connection to his ancestors. Disconnection from ancestry is a frequent theme in Afrofuturism, propelling fantasy and imagining a new home without ties to fraught histories.



Paulo Nazareth, *Para Venda (For Sale)*, 2010

FURTHER CONTEXT

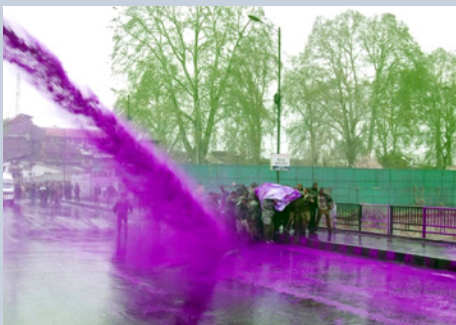
Apartheid took place in South Africa from 1948–1991 as an institutionalized system of racial segregation in which the white minority suppressed the black majority. The Population Registration Act (1950) divided people into four classes based on their ethnic identity, barring those in nonwhite classes from buying property or owning businesses in most of the country and segregated public facilities and schools. Though ending in 1991 with the rise and election of Nelson Mandela, the economic and social effects of apartheid still resonate throughout the country today. Mary Sibande and Zanele Muholi both directly reference apartheid in their work.

Mary Sibande

The work of **Mary Sibande** (South African, b. 1982) creates **sci-fi like** sculptures and photographs of an alter-ego character named Sophie. Sophie is a domestic worker and wears a version of the traditional servant's uniform transformed into a lush Victorian-era gown. The purple color in this photograph refers to the “Purple Rain Protest” or “Purple March,” which was held in Cape Town, South Africa on September 2, 1989 in protest of apartheid. Police sprayed dyed purple water onto the thousands of protesters to mark them for arrest after the march. Sibande transforms the domestic uniform, which is laden with associations of a brutal class struggle, into a powerful, alien-like garment with appendages or tentacles, using an Afrofuturist aesthetic of science fiction.



Images from the Purple Rain Protest,
September 2, 1989
Marc Hofer—AFP/Getty Images



Yawar Nazir—Getty Images



Mary Sibande, *A Terrible Beauty*, 2017

Zanele Muholi

Zanele Muholi (South African, b. 1972) pays homage with this self-portrait to her own mother and other South African domestic workers. Muholi's garments are made from clothespins and a doormat but styled to resemble a crown and cape, utilizing aspect of **fantasy and imaginative existence** to consider an alternative past. The everyday materials reference the materials used by the workers who, during apartheid, were only allowed into wealthy areas of South Africa to perform working-class jobs.



Muholi states: "The series is meant to acknowledge all domestic workers around the globe who continue to labor with dignity, while often facing physical, financial, and emotional abuses in their place of work. There continues to be little recognition and little protection from the state for the hard labor these women perform to feed and clothe and house their families."²

²<http://archive.stevenson.info/exhibitionsbs/muholi/text.htm>

Zanele Muholi, *Bester I, Mayotte*, from the *Somnyama Ngonyama* series, 2015

Questions for Looking

- How can photography serve as a form of activism or as a form of repression?
- Consider the quote that the title of this exhibition was taken from. What does the notion of an Anti-Slave mean?
- Consider the quote in the essay above by Celeste-Marie Bernier:
“For [Frederick] Douglass, photography was the lifeblood of being able to be seen and not caricatured, to be represented and not grotesque, to be seen as fully human and not as an object or chattel to be bought and sold.”
What role does representation play in the dismantling of dominant narrative?
- How do themes such as technology, science fiction, escapism, time travel, and fantasy help support alternative narratives?
- How do color, scale, and presentation effect how the work is viewed?
- Consider how the work is displayed. How does the installation add to the overall tone?
- Can you sense the feeling of dislocation in the work? Point to examples.
- Are there clues in each artists’ work that point to a specific place or time?
- What do these indicators of place—or lack thereof—say about the artists experiences or intentions?
- What metaphors might the artists be using in the images or with the use of materials?

Extended Resources

- Henry Louis Gates Jr., *Frederick Douglass's Camera Obscura: Representing the Antislave "Clothed and in Their Own Form,"* *Critical Inquiry* 42, no. 1 (Autumn 2015): 31-60
- Mark Dery, "Black to the Future: Interviews with Samuel R. Delany, Greg Tate, and Tricia Rose", 1993 [https://www.kit.ntnu.no/sites/www.kit.ntnu.no/files/Black%20to%20the%20Future%20\(Dery\)_0.pdf](https://www.kit.ntnu.no/sites/www.kit.ntnu.no/files/Black%20to%20the%20Future%20(Dery)_0.pdf)
- *Afrofuturism 2.0: The Rise of Astro-Blackness*, Edited by Reynaldo Anderson and Charles E. Jones, 2016 Lexington Books
- *Black Panther*, Ryan Coogler, Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures, 2018, motion picture
- Butler, Octavia, *Blood Child and Other Stories*, Seven Stories Press, 1995
- Hopkinson, Nalo, *The Chaos*, Margaret K. McElderry Books, 2012
- Hopkinson, Nalo, *The Salt Roads*, Grand Central Publishing, 2004
- Hopkinson, Nalo, "A Habit of Waste", *Fireweed* #53, 1996