

# AFROFUTURISM AND FLYING AFRICANS

Est. Time: 60-75 minutes

Subjects: General Music, ELA, History/Social Studies, Visual Art

Age Range: Middle & High School

[View the classroom lesson version](#)

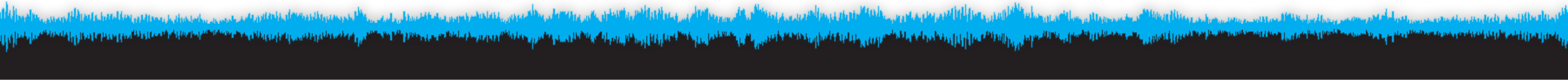
★ *TEACHROCK* ★





*What is Afrofuturism and what are some of the cultural and historical events that inspired and reinforced it?*

In this lesson you will:

- Define Afrofuturism and outline its defining characteristics
  - Examine accounts of Flying Africans from the Caribbean, North America, and South America
  - Discover some prominent Afrofuturist thinkers and artists of the 20th and 21st century
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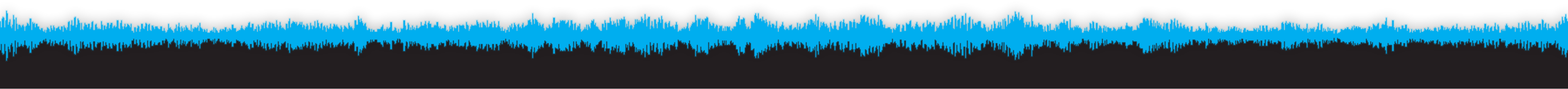
## GEORGE CLINTON AND PARLIAMENT-FUNKADELIC


Watch [this video](#) on the work of George Clinton and Parliament-Funkadelic.






Consider or ask a friend:


- According to the people interviewed in the clip, what is the significance of George Clinton and Parliament-Funkadelic?
  - In your own words, how would you describe Parliament-Funkadelic?
  - Parliament-Funkadelic was described in the clip as “Afrofuturist.” Have you ever heard the term “Afrofuturist” or “Afrofuturism”?
  - What do you think Afrofuturism might be? Write your idea of what it might mean on a piece of paper.
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- How does this definition compare to the definition you wrote? Are there any points of similarity? What about points of difference?
  - Do you think Afrofuturism is a new concept? Could it have existed before space travel?
  - Ideas related to Afrofuturism have existed well before the 20th century. How might Afrofuturistic ideas have been expressed centuries ago, before there was a space program? Where might someone find these ideas expressed?

**Afrofuturism embraces an infinite range of possibilities for Black people to live free and whole in a future of their design. Afrofuturism ignores boundaries of normal human possibility; time travel, flight and the exploration of unknown worlds are common themes.**







While not termed as such, Afrofuturist ideas have been part of African and African American folklore for centuries.

Read the included quotes from Toni Morrison, a Nobel laureate in literature, and Zora Neale Hurston, an anthropologist and writer who documented African American folktales.

**The one thing you say about a myth is that there's some truth in there, no matter how bizarre they may seem.**

**-Toni Morrison, Writer and Nobel Laureate, Literature (1931-2019)**


**"Folklore is the arts of the people before they find out that there is any such thing as art."**


**-Zora Neale Hurston, Anthropologist/Writer (1891-1960)**



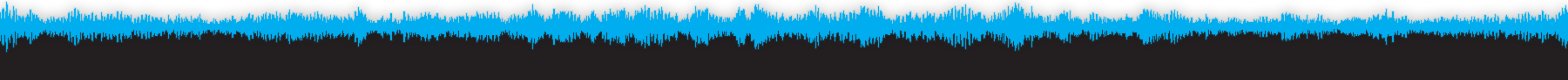


Consider or ask a friend:

- What do you think the message is behind Morrison's quote? In what ways might there be "truth in myth"?
  - What do you think the message is behind Hurston's quote? How might she be differentiating "art" from "folklore"?
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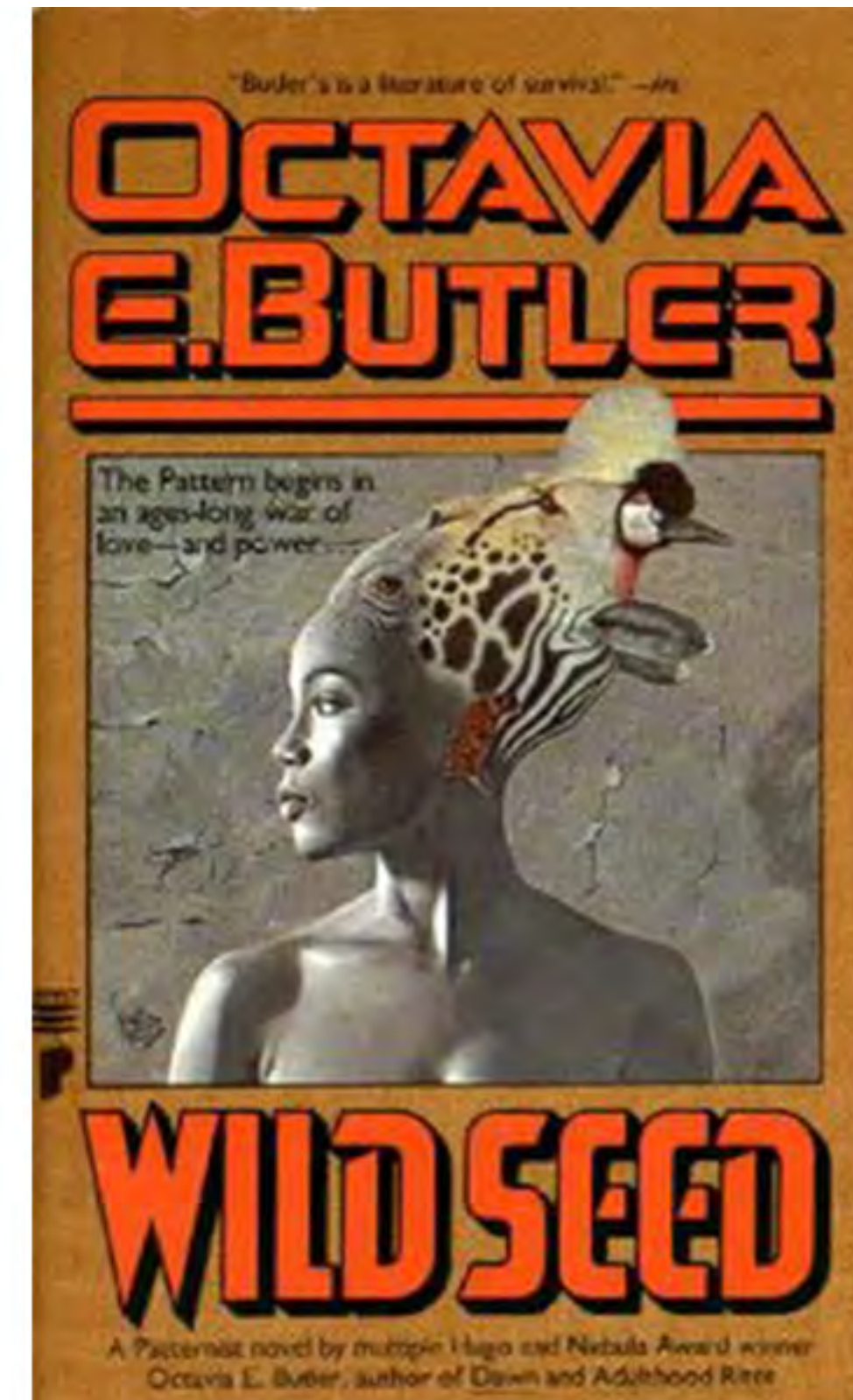


Space and the world that lies beyond what can be seen are at the center of countless spiritual traditions and mythologies found across the African continent. Having been passed down from one generation to the next, these world views survived the slave trade, the Middle Passage slavery trading route, and centuries of slavery to be reinterpreted in the age of human space travel. The focus on the skies and an interest in flight at the center of many Black cultures in the Americas has its roots in Africa.





Beginning in the late 20th century, older songs including spirituals like “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot” and “I Got Wings,” and folktales about flying Africans gave rise to the musical output of artists that include Sun Ra, Parliament-Funkadelic, Missy Elliott and Janelle Monáe, and the novels of Octavia Butler, N. K. Jemisin, and Samuel Delany.







Some of these 20th century and 21st century artists reclaim the symbolism of ancient African belief systems, such as those of Egypt, the Yoruba people that reside in Benin and Nigeria, or the Dogon people of Mali; they all envision an alternative present and future.








Their ideas and aesthetic can be described as Afrofuturistic. While the term “Afrofuturism” did not emerge until the 1990s, it describes this continuous stream of thought and cultural production that is documented over centuries. Cultural critic Michael Gonzales defines Afrofuturism as a catchphrase that describes the way that the possible worlds of tomorrow appear in music, art, theater, literature, politics, and academics today.







Certain characters and stories are featured repeatedly in Afrofuturist art in the Americas and African cultures that inspired Afrofuturism. Flying Africans appear throughout the **oral cultures** of the African **Diaspora**, in different countries where a variety of languages are spoken.

**Oral culture** is the sung and spoken story of a people. It may include history, science, folktales, spiritual beliefs, and philosophy.

**Diaspora** refers to a group of people originating from a homeland that have dispersed to other parts of the world








Examine this map of the creation of the African Diaspora.

Consider or ask a friend:

- What is this map showing?
  - Where, according to this map, was the “homeland” for the African diaspora? Where were they dispersed to? What was the cause of this dispersion?
  - Why might oral culture and folklore be important to the African diaspora?
  - In many places, learning to read or write was illegal for enslaved people. In these circumstances, why might folklore and oral culture be even more important?
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Watch [this video](#) of Toni Morrison discussing Flying Africans.







Consider or ask a friend:

- How might the story of the flying Africans relate to Morrison's idea that there is truth in myth? What might the truth be for the story of the flying African?
  - Why might it be significant that every enslaved person interviewed was aware of the story of flying Africans?
  - Why might the idea of flight be important to enslaved peoples?
  - Do you think the stories of the flying Africans could be considered "Afrofuturistic"? Why or why not?
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Throughout the Americas, there are two types of Flying African narratives:

***Stories of Return*** - a person flies home to Africa.

***Stories of Rising Above*** - a person chants words to create the possibility of flight.

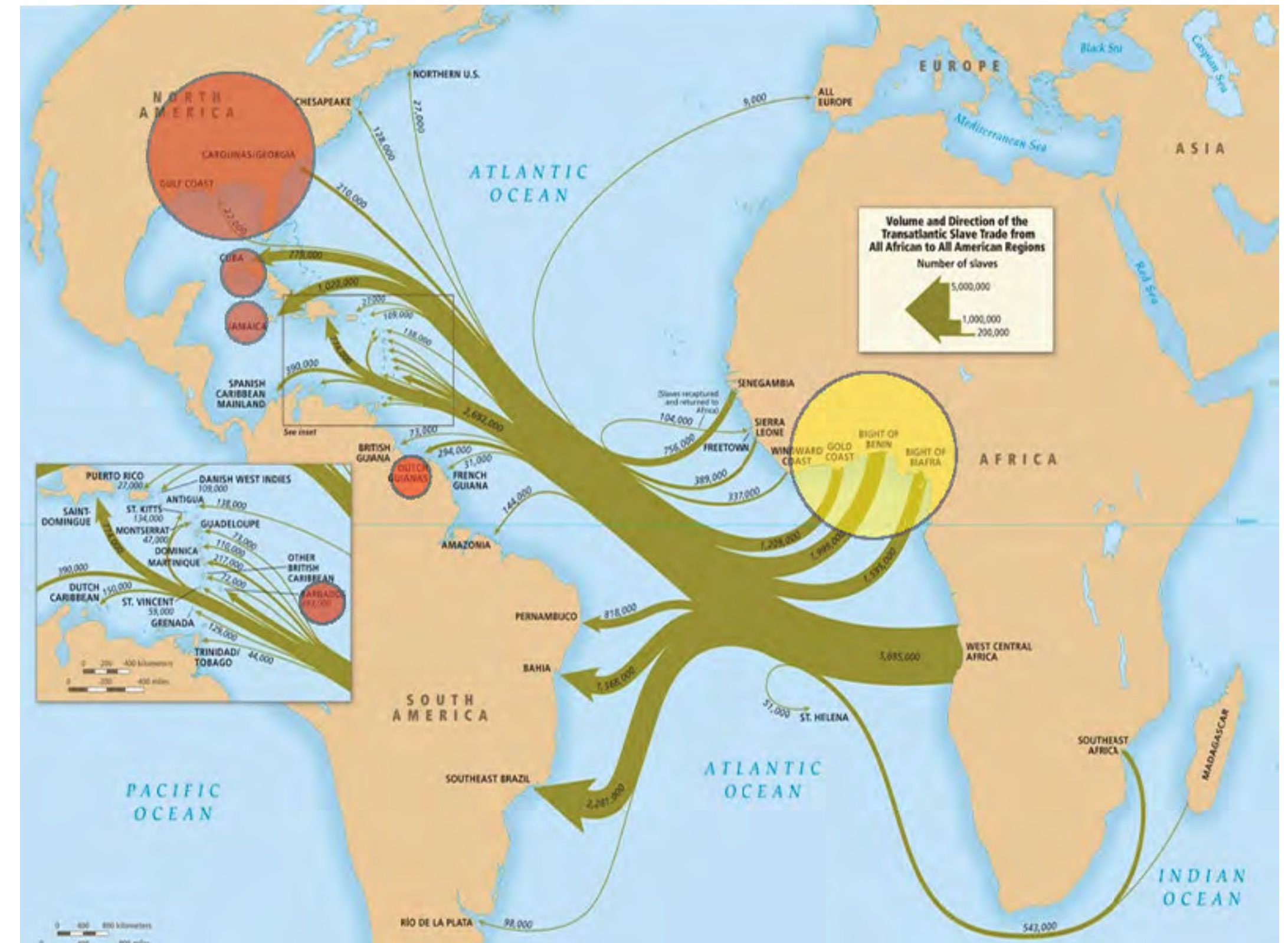
Read accounts of these Flying African narratives [here](#).





Again examine **this map** of the creation of the African Diaspora.


The yellow circle marks the area in West Africa where people in the Americas said that Flying Africans originated. Each orange circle marks a place in the Americas where people gave testimonials of Flying Africans.







Consider or ask a friend:

- What do you notice about the places where people reported seeing Flying Africans?
  - What things might be different in these places?
  - What do all the people who know of Flying Africans have in common?
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Examine **this handout** on Afrofuturist Visual Art and Album Covers, and **this handout** featuring song lyrics that have Afrofuturist themes. Consider the characteristics within the artwork and songs which relate to the narratives of "Stories of Return" and "Stories of Rising Above."

If possible, share your observations with a friend or classmate.





# SUMMARY

- Many of the themes that are now considered to be Afrofuturist can be traced back to the 19th century
- Oral culture is an expression of a people's worldview and gives a critical account of life for people who were denied access to literacy
- Afrofuturism is an imaginative and humanizing answer to the challenge of an oppressive present





# BE CREATIVE

Watch one of the videos below and write a short response on whether or not you consider it “Afrofuturistic”:

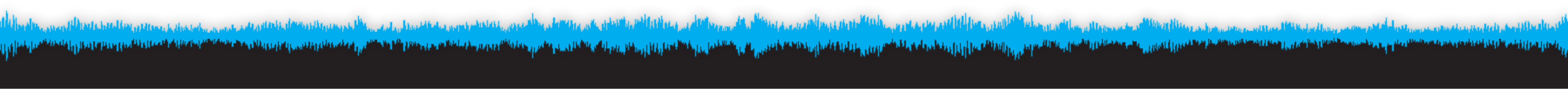
- **“Never Catch Me”** *You’re Dead!* – Flying Lotus (2014)
- **“Mothership Connection (Star Child)”** *George Clinton: The Mothership Connection* – Parliament-Funkadelic (1998)
- **“The Rain (Supa Dupa Fly)”** *Supa Dupa Fly* – Missy Elliott (1997)
- **“Sun Moon Child”** *Her Holy Water: A Black Girl’s Rock Opera* – Imani Uzuri; video altar piece by pierre bennu (2007)





# BE CREATIVE

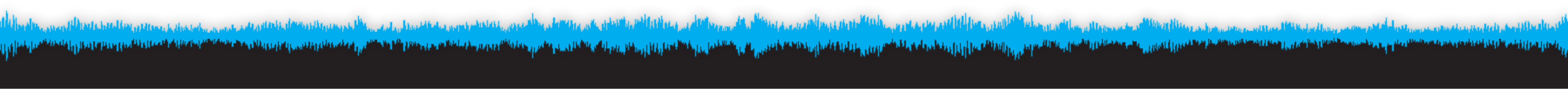
Read [this article](#) from The New York Times and write a short essay on the way that Ruth E. Carter's costume designs for Black Panther embraces Afrofuturistic ideas.





# CONNECT

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