
***AFRICA IS THE FUTURE* by Nicolas Premier**

At the confluence of African and Afro-descendant experiences that transcend space-time—or how to heal from repeated traumas?

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Colloquially referred to as the “cradle of humanity,” Africa is reminiscent of humanity’s childhood, its primal state. While this appellation might be suggestive of ascendancy, i.e., of what in legal terms is referred to as *primogeniture*, or the “right of inheritance of the firstborn child,” it is clear that the Western world, which grew out of the “old continent,” stubbornly continues to view Africa as an eternal child and fails to recognize its significant contribution to the world’s wealth (either past or present). In our imagination, Africa is reduced to an immutable past, close to the state of nature so dear to Jean-Jacques Rousseau.¹ This continent is portrayed as the starting line in the race for linear evolution when a more accurate description might be the place where the world goes to reinvent itself and drive progress forward. Take for example, the revival of so-called modern art, which was spurred by the discovery of African statuary by European artists in the 20th century.² And the everyday technologies of this 21st century that are largely made possible due to the abundance of metals that have been lying beneath central African soils for millennia, just inches away from our fingertips unbeknownst to us.

Associating terms like “Africa” and “future” may spark surprise, as in the Eurocentric collective imagination, progress and time follow a linear path from a dark, primitive past and evolving indefinitely. So, how can the eternal past embody the future? Might time be more malleable than we assume? In a passage from his novel, *Tout-Monde*, Édouard Glissant evokes the possibility that various stories can repeat themselves: that time, destiny and history “intersect, meet, and repel each other.”³ Where time and when space converge, our perception of time and experience becomes more cyclical.

In his multimedia work *Africa is the Future*, Franco-Congolese artist Nicolas Premier plays on the notion of both cyclical and linear temporality, but also with other time-related considerations, namely, mourning and resilience. The film *Africa is the Future* was released during a time of profound upheaval, amidst the global coronavirus pandemic and the Black Lives Matter protests following the murder of George Floyd. It deals with how history repeats itself and with the ongoing trauma experienced within the Black community. In its structure,

¹ In his *Discourse on the origin and foundations of inequality among men* (1755), Rousseau developed the concept of the “state of nature” and the “myth of the noble savage.”

² Colin Rhodes, *Primitivism and Modern Art*, London, Thames and Hudson, 1994, p. 107.

³ Édouard Glissant, *Tout-Monde*, Paris, Gallimard, 1993 p. 52.

messages, and evolution, the work intersects the present time with other temporalities that influence our personal and collective history, and also raises questions about the trauma and the resulting grieving process. How can we heal when physical and psychological violence is repeated ad nauseam?

Africa is the Future underwent many transformations between 2001 and 2020 but was first born of a statement which could be interpreted as provocative or even a joke. It has gradually evolved over time into a thirty-minute video-ritual, available only at the beginning of each lunar cycle on the date of the new moon. I propose here to elaborate on how this complex, poetic work evolved, as well as to analyze and interpret the various strategies that Premier employs to convey that Africa indeed is the future.

1. Multiple inceptions and variations

Africa is the Future went through several stages of creation and was reborn multiple times before taking its current form. Let's take a brief moment to contemplate the project's deeper intentions as it evolved in multiple directions over nearly twenty years of development.

Nicolas Premier began elaborating the work on his first trip to Congo-Brazzaville in 2001⁴, where he reconnected with his origins and was marked by the conflict raging through the region. The country had been torn by civil war since 1997, when a coup d'état put then president, Denis Sassou Nguesso, nicknamed "the Emperor" back in power after having lost it to Pascal Lissouba in 1992. The conflict raged on for four⁵ years, the army clashing with various militias, resulting in significant death and the disappearance or flight of hundreds to neighbouring countries.⁶ The international community remained indifferent to the atrocities committed despite the calls from members of the Congolese community in exile.⁷ Nicolas Premier arrived in the Congo amidst this conflict. Not long after his arrival came the fall of the World Trade Center's twin towers on September 11, 2001. The international shock wave caused by the event astonished the artist, then in a war-torn area, who couldn't help but wonder about the cognitive dissonance of it all. He felt shocked by the immediacy of the local population's sympathy for this disaster whilst they themselves were going through the darkest of times amidst shocking indifference. To this day, the global community remains largely ignorant or cognizant of the conflict or of its consequences.

The second stage of creation was comprised of a visual art exhibition upon his return to France. This is when the artist first coined the expression *Africa is the Future*. The exhibition

⁴ Congo-Brazzaville was formerly part of French Equatorial Africa. The political region being referred to is determined by the capital: Congo-Brazzaville is the capital of the Republic of the Congo and Congo-Kinshasa of the DRC or Democratic Republic of the Congo.

⁵ This war is dated between 1997 and 2002 or 1993 and 2003, depending on whether or not one includes localized conflicts taking place in 1993.

⁶ According to Patrice Yenga, the war has totalled over 30,000 fatalities, nearly 200,000 casualties, with over 4,000 homes destroyed, 800,000 displaced, and nearly 100,000 women raped. See *La guerre civile du Congo-Brazzaville, 1993-2002. "Chacun aura sa part"* Paris, Éditions Karthala, 2006, p. 387.

⁷ Jean-Claude Mayima-Mbemba, *La violence politique au Congo-Brazzaville, devoir de mémoire contre l'impunité*, Paris, Éditions L'Harmattan, 2008. pp. 40-41.

featured portraits of people that the artist had encountered during his stay in the Congo. Initially considered only as a title for the exhibition, the phrase, which was printed on T-shirts during the vernissage, quickly became a slogan that met with great success. The creation of a brand based on that phrase constitutes the third phase of the work. With the help of artist Patrick Ayamam, Nicolas Premier developed a line of T-shirts featuring the now famous slogan. Next came a media project celebrating the clothing brand's ten-year anniversary in 2014. Premier created a series of headlines for an imaginary magazine, *AITF*, projecting Africa as the world's leading power in the year 2030. This initiative lent an unambiguously Afro-futurist aspect to the project, proposing a vision of what a future Africa might look like unfettered by Western representations of the continent. The project poked fun at various codes of photojournalism, notably those proposed by *Life* magazine, which laid the groundwork for such types of publications in all their complexity and imaginativeness. The symbolic reversals are scathing, calling into question if not thwarting the erroneous view the world continues to hold about the African continent. The selected topics and montage tend away from the habitually miserabilist imagery populated by white saviours, with the artist depicting a triumphant, future-centric African society. Headlines notably announce the return of the Paris obelisk to Luxor (fig. 1), in reference the plethora of African monuments and artefacts offered as gifts or looted during the 1880s on display in Western museums. Also featured is the portrait of an African cosmonaut returning home from Mars (fig. 2) and a mention of African doctors providing humanitarian aid to European countries. *AITF*'s "mockumentary"-style publications advocate for the recovery (or reclaiming) of black African history and the depiction thereof. They actuate a narrative reversal and, at the same time, challenge the validity of the usual imagery. This process is fully in line with the Afrofuturist aesthetic developed by author Reynaldo Anderson in his text "Afrofuturism 2.0 & the Black Speculative Art Movement: Notes on a Manifesto":

Afrofuturism 2.0 is the beginning of both a move away and an answer to the Eurocentric perspective of the 20th century's early formulation of Afrofuturism that wondered if the history of African peoples, especially in North America, had been deliberately erased. Or to put it more plainly, future-looking Black scholars, artists, and activists are not only reclaiming their right to tell their own stories, but also to critique the European/American digerati class of their narratives about cultural others, past, present and future and, challenging their presumed authority to be the sole interpreters of Black lives and Black futures.⁸

Anderson's essay demonstrates that the notion of Afrofuturism also falls under the umbrella term: Black Speculative Arts Movement (BSAM), encompassing various other Afro-centric sensibilities.⁹ So, while the video *Africa is the Future*, is by the very nature of its title an exemplar of Afrofuturism, it could very well integrate into other BSAM categories.

⁸ Reynaldo Anderson, "Afrofuturism 2.0 & the Black Speculative Arts Movement: Notes on a Manifesto," *Obsidian*, vol. 42, No. 1–2, 2016, p. 230.

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 234–235.e

2. “Then and now, same difference...” or the acknowledgement of the cyclical nature of time and history.

The film starts by plunging the spectator into a vortex of infinite blue as far as the eye can see. Comes next the confirmation that the airtight barriers between past, present, and future are non-existent with the appearance of the introductory sentences:

The future is already there.

It has always been.

It precedes and begets the reality.

The images that follow illustrate the repetitive nature of traumatic events within Black communities. Next comes a modern reference with a close-up view of a boat carrying migrants across the Mediterranean Sea which fades into a parallel story of a 16th century slave ship, ironically named the *Misericordia*, departing from the island of Sao Tomé.¹⁰ Premier thereby connects two stories of migration.

Through these narrative assemblies, *Africa is the Future* highlights historically repeated injustices and the various forms of resistance against these injustices. The various movements of the film distill these proofs of resistance with a view to confronting the structural racism¹¹ that discreetly seeks to undermine them. In this, the film shares commonalities with Canadian artist Camille Turner’s project: *Afronautic Research Lab*, which has notably been presented in Montreal¹² and other Canadian cities. This installation, combined with a performance where Afronauts return to Earth after 10,000 years of absence, illustrates the repetitive nature of the violence perpetrated against the black community be it in Canada or abroad through the accumulation of archival documents. Turner thus provides evidence to better fight the systemic silencing of violence.

Contrary to the tenets of Afrofuturism, however, which focus on the future, technology, and the imaginary (speculation), Premier overlaps an actual present event and an actual past event to create a surreal moment reminiscent of Glissant’s *Tout Monde*, where “a real transformation of the mind and sensitivity [...] a relationship¹³” is established. This could more aptly be described as afrosurrealism. In his manifesto, D. Scot Miller distinguishes Afrofuturism from Afrosurrealism¹⁴ by comparing their approaches: on one hand, he presents afrofuturism as a (“[...] diaspora intellectual and artistic movement that turns to science, technology, and science fiction to speculate on black possibilities in the future¹⁵”), while he defines Afrosurrealism as the

¹⁰ Eric Robert Taylor, *If We Must Die: Shipboard Insurrections in the Era of the Atlantic Slave Trade*, 2006, p. 180.

¹¹ Reni Eddo-Lodge, *Why I'm No Longer Talking to White People About Race*, London, Bloomsbury Publishing, 2017, pp. 83.

¹² Presentation of *Afronautic Research Lab*, performance by Camille Turner at Artexte, Montreal, November 10, 2018.

¹³ Glissant, op. cit., pp. 54. 54.

¹⁴ D. Scot Miller, “Close-Up: Afrosurrealism: AFROSURREAL MANIFESTO Black Is the New black—a 21st-Century Manifesto,” *Black Camera, An International Film Journal*, vol. 5, No. 1, Fall 2013, pp. 113–117.

¹⁵ [Our translation] [...] an artistic movement that uses science fiction, technology, and futuristic elements to imagine the possibilities of Black people in the future. Ibid., p. 114.

questioning of the notion of the future and associates it with the present moment (*Right Now*), seeing as the atrocities projected into the possible future have ultimately already occurred¹⁶. A shift between the editorial project *AITF* and the video *Africa is the Future* should be noted here. The first project focuses on possible futures while the video work emphasizes the notion of *future-past* put forth by the Afrosurrealist manifesto. The worst has already taken place and merely reappears like a ghost.

[...]

Conclusion

Africa is the Future is a complex work with multiple possible interpretations. Like M. NourbeSe Philip, Nicolas Premier takes an investigative approach, dissecting popular culture and archives to create a counter-narrative that frees us from stereotypes and erroneous representations of Black communities.

Through the assembly and reassembly of archives touching on literary and cinematographic references or drawn from the world of television or advertising, *Africa is the Future* highlights the plurality and complexity of not only African American experiences, but also Congolese, Afro-Brazilian, Afro-European, and Caribbean experiences, i.e., the Black Pan-African experience as a whole. In doing so, he emphasizes and demonstrates the ongoing connection between the African continent and its diaspora and the importance of bringing these different spaces and communities together to heal centuries of separations and fractures.

Referencing Christina Sharpe's work *In the Wake* and The Afro Surreal Manifesto by D. Scot Miller, Premier departs from the linear temporality typical of much Western philosophy and opts for a more porous temporal vision (*future-past*), which allows him to draw attention to known and experienced historical facts and events. This in turn promotes the perception and recognition of the mechanisms of an anti-Black capitalist system that is running out of steam. Thus, the video-ritual enacts a kind of purification of imaginations and fosters a form of communion, due to its monthly recurrence on the new moon. It also fosters the concrete (in real space) or virtual (on the website) development of a sense of community, thereby promoting greater communal and self-love and contributing to the healing of our transgenerational wounds, one cycle at a time.

The film is shown at every new moon for a 24-hour period only: <https://africaisthefuture.com/>.

¹⁶ "What is the future? The future has been around so long it is now the past. Afrosurrealists expose this from a 'future-past' called RIGHT NOW." Ibid.