



Afrofuturism and Arabfuturism: Reflections of a Present-day Diasporic Reader

Writing a review of a recent publication on Afrofuturism for Tohu Magazine has led Lama Suleiman to explore the still-nascent concept of Arabfuturism and its potential relevance to the discourse on Arab and Palestinian cultural production.

Review / Lama Suleiman June 12, 2016

Anderson, Reynaldo, and Charles E. Jones. *Afrofuturism 2.0: The Rise of Astro-Blackness*. London: Lexington Books, 2016, 240 pages

Edited by Communication scholar Reynaldo Anderson and leading Africana Studies professor Charles E. Jones, *Afrofuturism 2.0: The Rise of Astro-Blackness*, is a collection of essays that examines Afrofuturism as a genre of Afrodiasporic cultural production, and as a framework for analysis and critique from within various fields of Black technocultural studies. In undertaking such an examination, the authors and contributors seek to define what they call Astro-Blackness “in which a person’s Black state of consciousness, released from the confining and crippling slave or colonial mentality, becomes aware of the multitude and varied possibilities and probabilities with the universe.”¹

Having a somewhat remote interest in science fiction (mostly as contradicting affinities either towards consumerist escapism or anarchist imagination), Afrofuturism 2.0 proves to be not only an educational experience, but a necessary provocation of questions on Pan-Arab culture, which may be read through various Palestinian states of being – whether present, absent, or imagined.

Afrofuturism as an expression first surfaced in the work of Afrofuturist forefather, jazz musician Sun Ra, from the depths of 1950s American institutional racism and marginalization. Ra has mixed various African symbols, poetry, and philosophy, through extra-terrestrial transfiguration and fantasmic amalgamation of ancient and alien technologies, in a manner that recaptures, reimagines, and revises Afrodiasporic history and present – often with a tint of sarcasm. In his film *Space is the Place* (1974), “Ra attempts to save Earth’s inhabitants by offering them off-world employment with Outer Spaceways Incorporated, but seeing that the position provides no pay and requires giving up Earthly pleasures and vices, only a handful take him up on the offer” (Anderson and Jones, 2016:65).

An excerpt from Sun Ra's *Space is the Place*, 1974

Video of An excerpt from Sun Ra's *Space is the Place*, 1974
An excerpt from Sun Ra's *Space is the Place*, 1974

Throughout the 1970s, Afrofuturistic expression was taken up by Funk musician George Clinton, becoming a notable musical genre, then a more pronounced artistic framework through the sci-fi literature of Octavia Butler and Samuel R. Delany, until it became a recognised discourse through the critical and scholarly attempts of the 1990s (Mark Dery, Kudwo Eshun, Mark Sinker, and Paul Gilroy, for example). In 1993, the term Afrofuturism was coined by cultural critic Mark Dery in an attempt to address the scarcity of Black sci-fi productions in the face of the total lack of



representation of African Americans in popular science fiction. Since, Afrofuturism has been evolving into a wider Pan-African cultural propinquity, by navigating the future, present, and past through the use of advanced technology.

While it may seem (and sometimes criticized as) a recent appropriation of science fiction, the idea and progression of Afrofuturism has had ever-deepening roots in African diasporic history and Black culture. In one of the most analytically rich chapters *The Armageddon Effect: Afrofuturism and the Chronopolitics of Alien Nation*, Canadian scholar Tobias c. van Veen shows that “a number of Afrodiasporic cultural productions embraced alien, outerspace, and off-world tropes. Central to these science fictional tropes was an account of the Atlantic slave trade, narrativized and reimagined as the armageddon of alien abduction” (Anderson and Jones, 2016:68). Whether it is in metaphors of alien abductions or robot slavery – unlike Western dystopian sci-fi, for Afrofuturism the apocalypse has already happened; it is the very genesis from which it develops. In the words of British writer Mark Sinker, quoted in the book’s 4th chapter (1992):

*The ships landed long ago: they already laid waste whole societies, abducted and genetically altered swathes of citizenry, imposed without surcease their values. Africa and America – and so by extension Europe and Asia – are already in their various ways Alien Nation. No return to normal is possible: what “normal” is there to return to?*²

In a pessimistic, lamenting Middle Eastern reading, one can find some comforting nostalgia in the despair from the fact that really there isn’t any such possible return.³ But for Afrodiasporic culture, specifically in the form of Afrofuturism, such despair has evolved into a reinvention of narratives that attend to the “cultural and historical void left behind by the Middle Passage”.⁴

More recent manifestations of Afrofuturism deal with matters not solely defined by a direct relationship to colonial violence, such as hip-hop, feminist sci-fi, holographic popular culture, augmented space, and more classical forms of art. For example, in another chapter in the book, Kenya-born and Brooklyn-based artist Wangechi Mutu’s painting *Non je ne regrette rien* (2007) is examined as a form of “cyborg grammar.”

[07_021_Non_je_ne_regrette_rien_hiEDITED\[3\].jpg](#) [1]



[2]Wangechi Mutu, Non je ne regrette rien, 2007

Ink, paint, mixed media, plant material and plastic pearls on Mylar. 54 x 87 in.
Courtesy of the Artist and Victoria Miro Gallery.

Using collage as a technique of deconstruction and reconstruction, Mutu assembles a mutilated and disfigured human-machine-animal cyborg⁵ from anatomies of a scorpion's tail, a motorcycle wheel, an animal's hoof, a serpent, and blooming flowers. By employing Afrofuturism as a cultural-historical practice, Mutu's work assists those who might wish to step outside representations of gendered objectifications and discourses of victimization:

*Mutu revises spaces of capital and commerce that have historically figured black female subjects as objects for consumption – from beauty magazines to science pamphlets to anatomy textbooks...Non je ne regrette rien unhinges the black female body as a locus upon and within which normative racial, gender, and sex codes materialize...it demands that we rethink what it means to be black, woman, and human in the twenty-first century.*⁶

Taken from a wider perspective, Afrofuturism, as the book seeks to assert, can be moulded into a vibrant, analytical framework for exploring notions and practices of temporality in African cultural production. Indeed, the numerous studies and examples that unfold across the different parts of the book point to the rising instrumentalization of futurist and sci-fi aesthetics as important politically charged practices within contemporary Afrodiasporic culture.

However, critics have raised doubts on whether Afrofuturist sci-fi has anything to do with Africa as much as it has with Western cyber cultures, technocapitalism, and power structures. In fact, non-diasporic African futurism remains steadily absent throughout the whole book. Whether such futurism is emergent or not, its lack of mention indicates that the African/diasporic historical rupture might be greater than the attempt to reconcile Pan-African cultural production under an Afrofuturistic microscope.



The question of a truly Pan-African futurism remains an issue for future negation. Yet, Afrofuturism, as both theory and practice leaves a thoughtful inkling in the mind of the present-day diasporic reader, by evoking inferences regarding history and alternate futures in a Pan-Arabist context.

From a Palestinian readership perspective, Afrofuturism conjures echoes of lived experiences and collective memories that relate to Afrofuturistic threads such as the *apocalypse* that has already happened, the unattainable *return* to the *normal*, power regimes of colonialism, racism, marginalization, displacement, and collective identities of self-victimization. But Palestinian narratives of loss, dispossession, and catastrophe have to be seen as part of wider Arab narratives and from within a Pan-Arabist perspective. In doing so, Palestinian and Arab cultures may be able to venture on a post-post-colonial exploration of self and collective identities. In this sense, and through such reading, (Afro)futurism can offer diasporic⁷ cultures a way to deconstruct and reconstruct history in a manner that infiltrates territorial and mental borders.

It is not too astonishing, then, to find a small online proposal in artist Sulaiman Majali's [Towards Arabfuturism/s](#) [3] Manifesto, published in the 2nd issue of the online magazine *Novelty* in 2015:

Notions of belonging are constantly challenged...there is no homogenous culture or identity...The use of "-futurism" here is not intended to reference Futurism as movement, neither is it an explicit reference to the "futuristic". Instead "-futurism" is anticipating a future, it signifies a defiant cultural break, a projection forward into what is, beyond ongoing eurocentric, hegemonic narratives... these ideas can contribute to a growing counterculture of thought and action that through time will be found and used in the construction of alternative states of becoming.

While this may be a first utterance of Arabfuturism, unproclaimed Arab futuristic expressions have been increasingly surfacing in recent years.

In a tedious online search for glimmers of Arabfuturistic expression, leading to distant corners of the Internet, an unusual image pops out. [Helmet \(2016\) by Lebanese artist Ayman Baalbaki](#) [4] is an unsettling but beautifully mesmerising artifact from an indiscernible past/present/future. The impeccable design of Arabic calligraphy, engraved on hard-crafted metal, conjures themes that relate to Islam, militarism, and even astro-science. The mixing of the ancient with the futuristic makes any possible representations automatically paradoxical.

Furthermore, interest in Arabfuturism seems to be picking up through a number of [conferences](#) [5], art exhibitions, and various [discussions](#) [6] on Arab sci-fi in [literature](#) [7], film and other forms of expression – whether in the West or in the Arab world. A slightly off-the-subject but rather amusing example is this alternative history project, titled [the Life of the Wandering Sufi Al-Hajj Vladimir Lenin](#) [8]. Even sci-fi B movies are beginning to appear:

[Topaz Duo: Cosmic Phoenix Teaser Trailer](#) [9]

Video of טופז צמד, Cosmic Phoenix

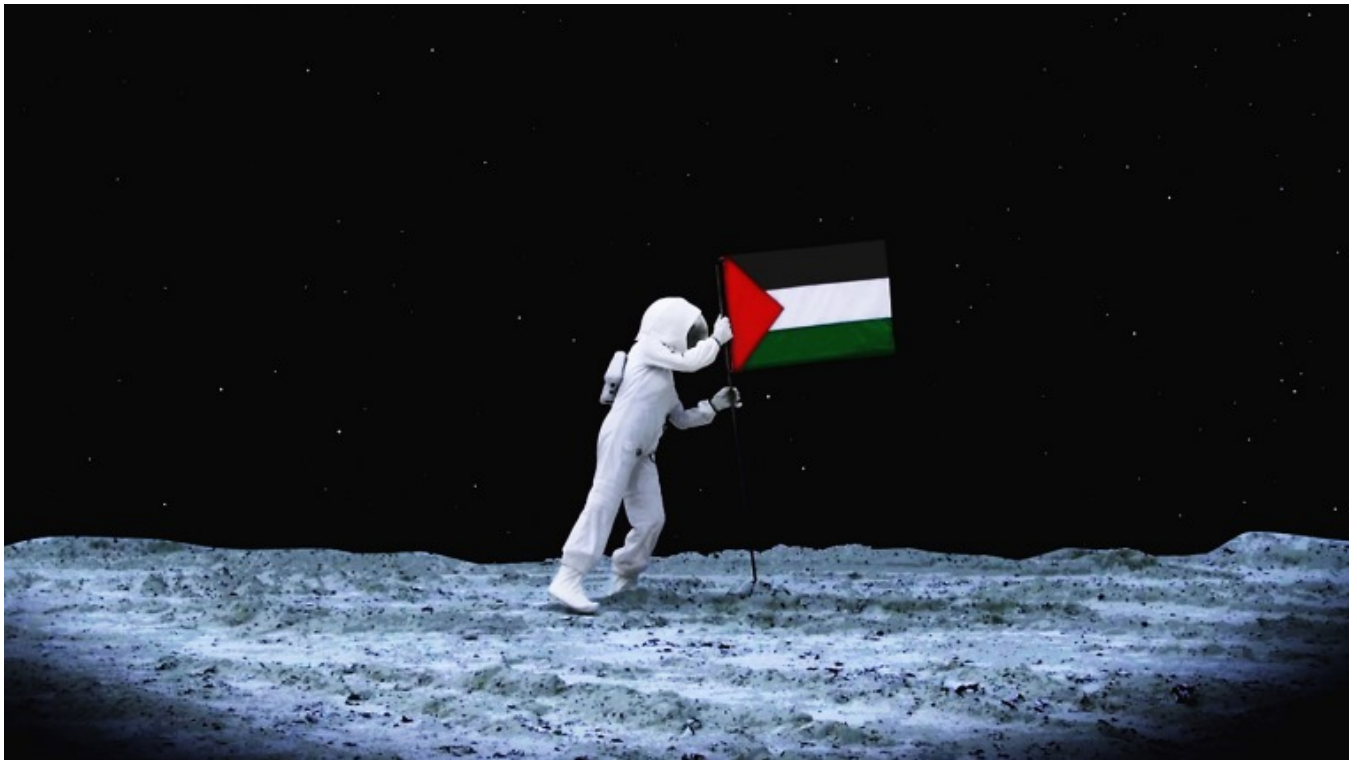
Topaz Duo. Cosmic Phoenix. 2013. 12:37 min⁸

In a specifically Palestinian context, artist [Larissa Sansour](#) [10] employs futuristic themes across several of her works.⁹ In *A Space Exodus* (2009), Sansour ventures into an adaptation of the iconic *Space Odyssey* sci-fi film to become the first Palestinian to plant the flag in moon-sand: "One small step for a Palestinian, a giant leap for mankind."



Beyond being a naïve fantasy of a reality in which Palestinians are able to reach the moon, *A Space Exodus* is a grim visual image of a Palestinian expelled as far as the moon, drifting alone in outer space, and into oblivion.

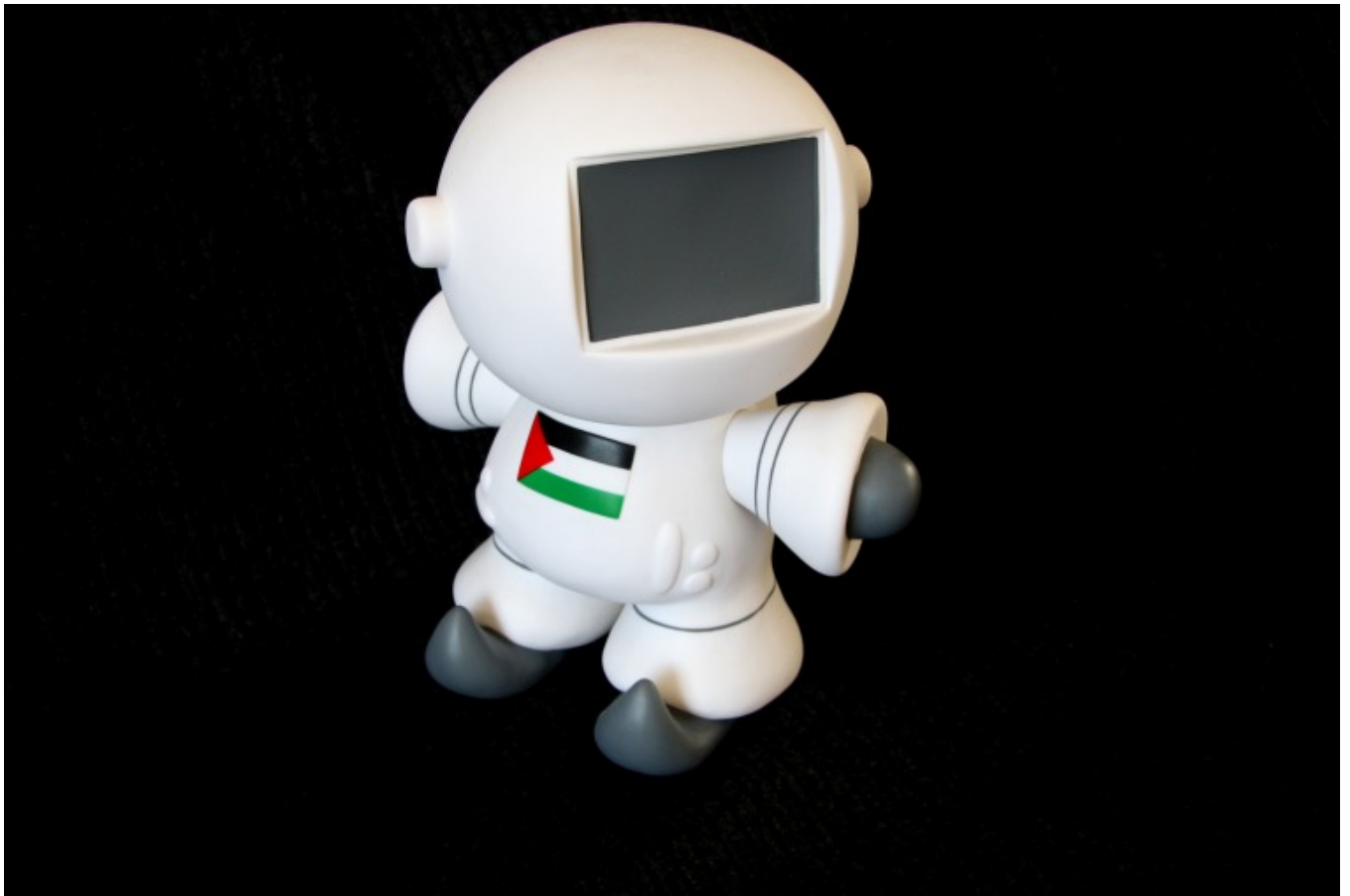
[SPACEflag \(mag.print\).jpg](#) [11]



[12] Larissa Sansour. *A Space Exodus*
2009. C-print, 67x120cm. Courtesy of the artist

Later that year, Sansour developed a complementary short photographic sequence of tiny plastic figurines of Palestinian astronauts that keep multiplying into more and more astronauts. *Palestinauts* (2009) is a gesture towards the increasing number of Palestinians that “[have long since taken matters into their own hands](#) [13]” in exodus, diaspora, and astro-existence.

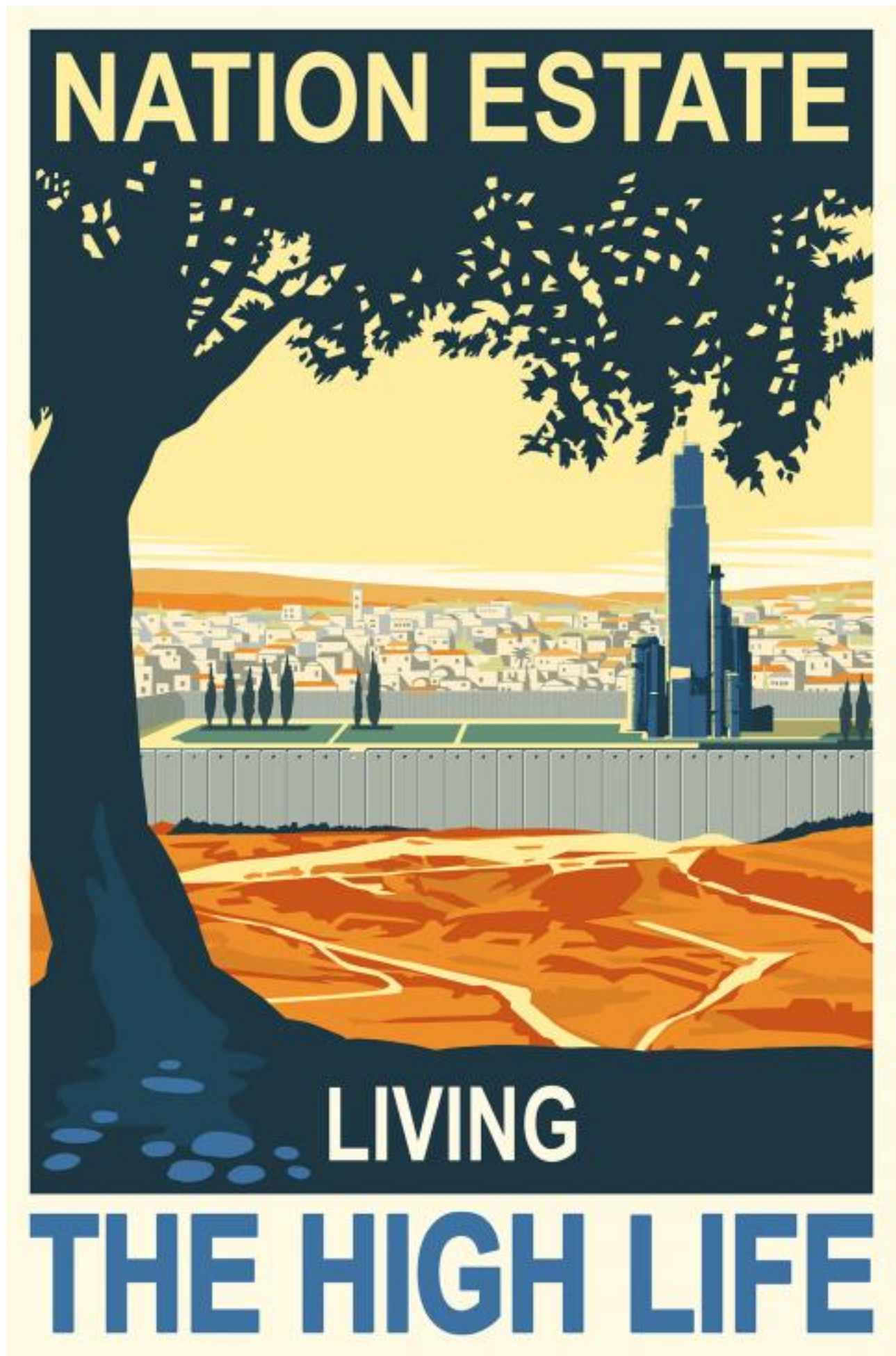
[Palestinaut.promo_.shot1_.jpg](#) [14]



[15] Larissa Sansour. *Palestinaut*
2010. Hard vinyl, 20cm. Courtesy of the artist

Yet another example of her work, titled *Nation Estate* (2012), is a short sci-fi film exploring the dystopian architecture of Palestinian statehood, envisioned in a vertical skyscraper with glass walls, revealing a view of the land decorated by the still-standing Apartheid Wall.

[08. NATION ESTATE poster \(small\).jpg](#) [16]





[17] Larissa Sansour. Nation Estate (Poster)
2012. Paper print, 100x150cm. Courtesy of the artist

However, as with Afrofuturism, there is a persisting disparity in Arabfuturism between diasporic and “native” futuristic expressions. In the Palestinian context, this disparity is sharper than in the rest of Arab culture. The examples of Europe-based artists, such as Sansour, Baalbaki, and Majali, demand deeper examination of such discrepancies. One possible explanation may reside in the ways that power structures in the Middle East administer collective imaginaries that foster victimhood, nationalist/religious fixation, and catastrophic (*Nakba*) cognitions.

The Palestinian-based music collective Tashweesh (Interference)¹⁰ also echoes some of the values put forward by futuristic expression. Their experimental short video project *Intro* (2009) is a condensed, fast-paced collage of archival visuals and sounds. Beginning with black-and-white images of sunny beaches, social gatherings, and happy, playful, singing people, the footage quickly turns into doomy, blurry, and distorted images of explosions and anxiety. “Without understanding a word, it’s clear from the stuttered and looped clips that a catastrophe has occurred,” claimed a recent review on *the National* [18]. Yet, as the trip-hop sampled music makes another radical cut, the scene changes again into fast flashing snapshots of uprisings, masquerading Oslo politicians, and a scene from an old Hollywood film reading: “I don’t know if he’s a negro or a white man.”

[Intro - المقدمة](#) [19] from [Tashweesh - تشويش](#) [20] on [Vimeo](#) [21].

Perhaps Arabfuturism might be eager a definition. But it is nonetheless clear that such work is heavily invested in experimenting with history, revision, technology, and the absent future. In the words of Tashweesh collective member Basel Abbas, “at the heart of it is a reflection on the contemporary picture across the Arab world using both old and new material...In that way we are always seeing the past and present as part of the same moment, they are very much connected when you look at it politically.”¹¹

The techniques and ideas practiced by Tashweesh may be futuristic, and they may be found in many other non-futuristic works and expressions. It remains unclear what can be characterized as futuristic when it comes to the peculiarities of different Arab cultures. However, through futuristic frameworks of thought, one can better appreciate practices that are “thoroughly invested in either imagining alternate futures or rewriting the past so as to change the present (from which futures are imagined)”.¹²

It is possible that Arabfuturism is still solely the domain of diasporic expression, yet the examples brought hitherto merely scratch the surface - they suggest that a deeper delving can turn our dystopian realities into a “pan-utopian” inquiry of the present, from the perspective of a future.

- ¹ Anderson & Jones, *Afrofuturism 2.0: The Rise of Astro-Blackness*, (London: Lexington Books, 2016), vii.
- ² Sinker in Anderson & Jones, 64, emphasis by L.S.
- ³ Note Sinker’s inescapable irony of “Alien Nation” as an Afrofuturistic disposition of alienation.
- ⁴ Anderson & Jones, 79. The Middle Passage is the term used to describe the sea journey



- undertaken by slave ships from West Africa to the West Indies carrying millions of enslaved Africans to the "New World".
- [5.](#) A fictional or hypothetical person whose physical abilities are extended beyond normal human limitations by mechanical elements built into the body (Oxford Dictionary of English, 3rd Edition).
 - [6.](#) Anderson & Jones, 17-18.
 - [7.](#) Diasporic cultures as cultures torn apart by displacement. The diasporic could be in nativity, in exile/refuge, or anywhere in between.
 - [8.](#) Watch full-length film [here](#) [22]
 - [9.](#) Sansour had recently opened a solo exhibition titled "[In the Future They Ate from the Finest Porcelain](#)" [23], at The Mosaic Rooms in London, on view through August 20, 2016.
 - [10.](#) Part of Ramallah Underground collective.
 - [11.](#) Alex Ritman. "[Running Interference: Tashweesh Have Come a Long Way from Hip-hop Roots](#)" [18] The National. May 3, 2011. Accessed June 02, 2016.
 - [12.](#) Anderson & Jones, 80.

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Links

- [1] <http://tohumagazine.server288.com/file/07021nonjeneregretterienhiedited3jpg>
- [2] https://tohumagazine.com/sites/default/files/07_021_Non_je_ne_regrette_rien_hiEDITED%5B3%5D.jpg
- [3] <http://www.smajali.co.uk/arch3.html>
- [4] <https://theartstack.com/artist/ayman-baalbaki/helmet-10>
- [5] <http://www.shubbak.co.uk/science-fiction-in-the-arab-world/>
- [6] <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2009/jul/30/arab-world-science-fiction>
- [7] <http://www.islamscifi.com/ian-campbell-on-muhammad-aziz-lahbabis-the-elixir-of-life/>
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- [9] <http://tohumagazine.server288.com/file/%D7%A6%D7%9E%D7%93-%D7%98%D7%95%D7%A4%D7%96-cosmic-phoeniz>
- [10] <http://www.larissasansour.com/>
- [11] <http://tohumagazine.server288.com/file/spaceflag-magprintjpg-1>
- [12] https://tohumagazine.com/sites/default/files/SPACEflag%20%28mag.print%29_1.jpg
- [13] <http://www.larissasansour.com/palestinauts.html>
- [14] <http://tohumagazine.server288.com/file/palestinautpromoshot1jpg>
- [15] https://tohumagazine.com/sites/default/files/Palestinaut.promo_.shot1_.jpg
- [16] <http://tohumagazine.server288.com/file/08-nation-estate-poster-smalljpg>
- [17] <https://tohumagazine.com/sites/default/files/08.%20NATION%20ESTATE%20poster%20%28small%29.jpg>
- [18] <http://www.thenational.ae/arts-culture/music/running-interference-tashweesh-have-come-a-long-way-from-hip-hop-roots>
- [19] <https://vimeo.com/9436876>
- [20] <https://vimeo.com/tashweesh>
- [21] <https://vimeo.com>
- [22] <https://vimeo.com/64440520>
- [23] <http://mosaicrooms.org/event/in-the-future-they-ate-from-the-finest-porcelain/>