



# SOUNDTRACKS

## SONGS THAT DEFINED HISTORY

### Swing Down: Afrofuturism & Flight in the Black Imagination

#### OVERVIEW

#### ESSENTIAL QUESTION

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

#### OVERVIEW

*In this lesson, students will explore Afrofuturism and its parallels in the oral traditions of the African diaspora, including Spirituals and accounts of Flying Africans. Students will view 21st Century music videos, live performances from the 1970s, hear primary documents read aloud and sing along with recordings of spirituals, to experience a range of Afrofuturist expression across eras, disciplines and artistic media.*

“The one thing you say about a myth is that there’s some truth in there, no matter how bizarre they may seem. I read a lot of those slave narratives, you know, that they published in the thirties, and the interviewer would ask certain basic questions and then he or she always asked that. ‘Have you ever heard of flying Africans or people taking up and flying back to Africa?’ They also asked them about ghosts trying to get at the heart of their mythology and their magic. And everybody, everybody said one of two things. No, I never saw any, but I heard about it or they said they had seen it...no one said, ‘What are you talking about? Flying Africans! Where’d you get that?’ ...Instead of it being a more naive escape story, it’s about flight. It really is about flight and flight comes up a lot in Spirituals. “I’ll Fly Away”. Understandably...I mean, it has a lot of connotations. So, I’m thinking how can I make a contemporary story about a Black man, a young Black man, who learns to fly or who makes his escape. Not geographical escape back to Africa but another mindset. How does he escape the prison, the cultural prison, that he found himself in? That was his journey.” - Toni Morrison



Artwork: Alisha B. Wormsley

In the above quote, the late Nobel laureate Toni Morrison describes the corpus of folklore about flying Africans that is found throughout the diaspora. Space is a recurrent theme of African diaspora mythology and the interest in flight can be traced back to the oral tradition that was sustained through centuries of slavery in this United States and Caribbean. In the late 20th and 21st century, older material including spirituals like “Swing Low” 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 Monae, and the novels of Octavia Butler, N. K. Jemisin, and Samuel Delany. Some of these artists reclaimed 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. But he also notes that even the meaning of the term is contested. Afrofuturism embraces an infinite range of possibilities for Black people to live free and whole in a future of their design. Afrofuturism deals with breaking through the boundaries of normative human possibility; time travel, flight and the exploration of unknown worlds are recurrent themes.

## OBJECTIVES

Upon completion of this lesson, students will:

### 1. KNOW (KNOWLEDGE):

- The definition of Afrofuturism
- About cultural continuity across the African diaspora
- The names of some Afrofuturist thinkers and artists of the 20th and 21st century
- About centuries old African astronomy and philosophy that anticipates Afrofuturism

### 2. MASTERY OBJECTIVE:

- Students will be able to define Afrofuturism and its defining characteristics by exploring folktales, song lyrics, visual art and film.

## ACTIVITIES

### MOTIVATIONAL ACTIVITY

1. Tell students that they will be assuming the role of ethnographers—social scientists who study people in their own environments. They will be watching a video of a musical performance, and as ethnographers, should practice a type of detailed description that anthropologist Clifford Geertz called “thick description.” They should observe the subject’s behavior, but also the context behind that behavior (the surrounding environment, the subject’s personal background, etc.). Ask students to take notes that detail the setting of the performance, the performer’s age, attire, body, body language, and anything else they notice.
2. Play **Clip 1, Parliament Funkadelic “Mothership Connection” - Live in Houston 1976** (<https://youtu.be/r5aHD5ruSZ0?t=2435>. Play from 40:35- 43:35. This is a YouTube link which may also feature advertising. We suggest loading the video before class.) Tell students this is a performance by the band Parliament-Funkadelic. Ask students:
  - What general observations did you have while watching the video?

- Where does it seem like the video was shot?
- How would you describe the singing? Does it seem planned, or spontaneous?
- What kind of audience might Parliament-Funkadelic play for?
- How would you describe the music featured in the video? Do the singers seem more professional or amateur? Are they performing for an audience?
- Who seems to be leading this event?
- Would you characterize this event as emotional? Why or why not?
- What is the vocalist singing about?
- How would you describe the clothing worn by the band?
- How would you describe the atmosphere created by this concert as an experience? Consider the lights, costumes, set, dance, etc.

## PROCEDURE

### 1. Show **Clip 2, George Clinton and Parliament-Funkadelic**. Ask students:

- 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”?

### 2. Ask students to write a definition of what they think “Afrofuturism” means on a scrap piece of paper.

### 3. Display **Image 1, Afrofuturism Definition**. Ask students:

- 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 the people went into space?
- How might Afrofuturistic ideas have been expressed centuries ago?

### 4. Show **Image 2, Zora Neale Hurston and Toni Morrison on Folktales & Myth**. Ask students:

- Are you familiar with either of the two people quoted in this image? Who are they? (*If needed, tell students that Zora Neale Hurston was an anthropologist and writer who documented African American folktales, and Toni Morrison was a Nobel laureate in literature.*)
- What do you think the message is behind Hurston’s quote? How might she be differentiating “art” from “folklore”?

- What do you think the message is behind Morrison’s quote? In what ways might there be “truth in myth?”
5. Play **Clip 3, Toni Morrison on Flying Africans**. Ask students:
- 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 African could be considered “Afrofuturistic”? Why or why not? (*If helpful, teachers could again display Image 1, Afrofuturism Definition.*)
6. Tell students that stories of Flying Africans are considered part of the **oral culture** of the **African Diaspora**. Ask students:
- What is meant by the phrase “oral culture”? What does each word mean? What might they mean combined? How might folklore be part of oral culture?
  - Have you ever heard the word “diaspora” before? What might it mean?
7. Tell students that the term “diaspora” refers to people originating from the same homeland that have dispersed to other parts of the world.
8. Display **Image 3, Flying Africans Diaspora Map**. Ask students:
- What do you think the message is behind Morrison’s quote? In what ways might there be “truth in myth?”
  - What is this map showing?
  - This map relates to the creation of the African Diaspora. Where according to this map was the “homeland” for the 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?
9. Pass out **Handout 1 - Flying African Testimonials** to students. Tell students that to honor the original way these stories were told, they will be read aloud rather than from the page. Ask four student volunteers to read each of the four stories in the handout while the rest of the class listens, with their handout turned face down so they can not read along.
10. Show **Image 3, Flying Africans Diaspora Map** once again. Tell students that throughout the Americas there are two types of Flying African narratives. In the first type, a person flies home to Africa. We can call these *Stories of Return*. In the second strand of Flying African stories, someone chants words to create the possibility of flight. We can call these the *Stories of Rising Above*. 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. Ask students:
- What do you notice about the places

where people report seeing Flying Africans? (*They are in different regions and/or continents.*)

- What things might be different in these places? (*Nationality, language, religion, climate, political system, etc.*)
- What do all the people who know of Flying Africans have in common? (*They all come from nations/regions where Africans were enslaved.*)

11. Pass out **Handout 2 - Bernice Johnson**

**Reagon on Spirituals**, and ask students to volunteer to read the handout.

12. Pass out **Handout 3 - Song Lyrics** to students. **Play Clip 4 “(In the Morning) When I Rise”** while the class reads along.

13. Tell students that some music, like opera or a symphony, is performed for an audience of people who sit still and listen quietly. This song comes from a different tradition where everyone is expected to join in singing and participate with clapping, tapping their feet or even movement. The singers on this recording are being led by Dr. Bernice Johnson Reagon, whose explanation of Spirituals we read in Handout 2. You can hear the singers clapping, tapping their feet and playing hand percussion.

14. When comfortable, ask the class to sing along with the song. After they begin singing, ask students to keep singing and try to clap and/or tap their feet with the music. (*Note to teacher: Having students close their eyes may help them focus and feel less self-conscious.*)

15. Play **Clip 5, Parliament Funkadelic “Mothership Connection” - Live in Houston 1976** (<https://www.youtube.com/>

[watch?v=r5aHD5ruSZ0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r5aHD5ruSZ0). Play from 42:07-45:57. This is a YouTube link which may also feature advertising. We suggest loading the video before class.) Ask students:

- Do you notice any similarities between this clip and the clip you watched previously? Pay particular attention to the lyrics.
- Do you think it would be easy to sing along with “(In the Morning) When I Rise” and “Mothership Connection”. Why? (*Answer: Both songs are built on repeating the same lyrics.*)
- Can you identify a repeated phrase from each song? How might repetition help a song to spread from one geographic area or survive over time?

16. Remind students that the flying African stories featured two major themes: returning home and rising above. Tell students they will now be examining how recent Afrofuturist works of music, art, or literature might draw upon similar ideas. Pass out **Handout 4- Afrofuturist Thinkers** and **Handout 5- Afrofuturist Visual Art and Album Covers**. Ask students to examine the handouts, as well as **Handout 3 - Song Lyrics** and identify if any of the works on the handouts express the ideas of either “returning home” or “rising above.” Ask students to share the connections they discovered with the class.

17. Next, ask students to underline or circle any of the phrases or imagery that appear in bold type in **Handout 2 - Bernice Johnson Reagon on Spirituals** in the rest of their handouts.

## SUMMARY ACTIVITY

1. Display **Image 4, Writing Prompt**. Ask students to complete the prompt, and share or turn in the response.
2. Read **Handout 6 - The Afrofuturistic Design of “Black Panther”** 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 . Reference the article and at least one quote by Octavia Butler, Samuel Delany or Sun Ra. You may also use any of the materials from this lesson.

## EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

1. Watch one of the videos in the below playlist, and write a short response on whether or not you consider it “Afrofuturistic”. Refer to Image 1, Afrofuturism Definition. Use **Handout 1 - Flying African Testimonials** and **Handout 2 - Bernice Johnson Reagon on Spirituals** to build your argument.
  - “Never Catch Me” You’re Dead! -Flying Lotus (2014) (<https://youtu.be/2lXD0vv-ds8>)
  - “Mothership Connection (Star Child)” P-Funk Live Earth Tour- Parliament (1976) ([https://youtu.be/\\_tbulTygukM](https://youtu.be/_tbulTygukM))
  - “The Rain (Supa Dupa Fly)” Supa Dupa Fly - Missy Elliott (1997) ([https://youtu.be/\\_tbulTygukM](https://youtu.be/_tbulTygukM))
  - “Sun Moon Child” Her Holy Water: A Black Girl’s Rock Opera - Imani Uzuri; video altar piece by pierre bennu. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MAFhh47DYCc>)

## STANDARDS

### COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS

#### *College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Reading (K-12)*

Reading 1: Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.

Reading 2: Determine central ideas or themes of a text and analyze their development; summarize the key supporting details and ideas.

Craft and Structure 4: Interpret words and phrases as they are used in a text, including determining technical, connotative, and figurative meanings, and analyze how specific word choices shape meaning or tone.

Craft and Structure 6: Assess how point of view or purpose shapes the content and style of a text.

Integration of Knowledge and Ideas 7: Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse media and formats, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words.

Integration of Knowledge and Ideas 9: Analyze how two or more texts address similar themes or topics in order to build knowledge or to compare the approaches the authors take.

Range of Reading and Level of Text Complexity 10: Read and comprehend complex literary and informational texts independently and proficiently.

#### *College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Writing (K-12)*

Text Types and Purposes 1: Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.

Production and Distribution of Writing 4: Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.

Research to Build and Present Knowledge 9: Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.

#### *College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Language (K-12)*

Language 1: Demonstrate command of the conventions of standard English grammar and usage when writing or speaking.



Language 2: Demonstrate command of the conventions of standard English capitalization, punctuation, and spelling when writing.

Vocabulary Acquisition and Use 5: Demonstrate understanding of figurative language, word relationships, and nuances in a word meaning.

Vocabulary Acquisition and Use 6: Acquire and use accurately a range of general academic and domain-specific words and phrases sufficient for reading, writing, speaking, and listening at the college and career readiness level; demonstrate independence in gathering vocabulary knowledge when encountering an unknown term important to comprehension or expression.

### *College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Speaking and Listening (K-12)*

Comprehension & Collaboration 2: Integrate and evaluate information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually, quantitatively, and orally.

Presentation of Knowledge 4: Present information, findings, and supporting evidence such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning and the organization, development, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.

## **SOCIAL STUDIES – NATIONAL COUNCIL FOR THE SOCIAL STUDIES (NCSS)**

Theme 1: Culture

Theme 2: Time, Continuity, and Change

Theme 3: People, Place, and Environments

Theme 8: Science, Technology, and Society

Theme 9: Global Connections

Theme 10: Civic Ideals and Practices

## **NATIONAL STANDARDS FOR MUSIC EDUCATION**

### *Core Music Standard: Responding*

Analyze: Analyze how the structure and context of varied musical works inform the response.

Interpret: Support interpretations of musical works that reflect creators' and/or performers' expressive intent.

Evaluate: Support evaluations of musical works and performances based on analysis, interpretation, and established criteria.





*Core Music Standard: Connecting*

Connecting 11: Relate musical ideas and works to varied contexts and daily life to deepen understanding.



## RESOURCES

### VIDEOS

- CNN Soundtracks: George Clinton and Parliament-Funkadelic
- Toni Morrison on Flying Africans
- “(In the Morning) When I Rise”

### HANDOUTS

- Handout 1 - Flying African Testimonials
- Handout 2 - Bernice Johnson Reagon on Spirituals
- Handout 3 - Song Lyrics
- Handout 4 - Afrofuturist Thinkers
- Handout 5 - Afrofuturist Visual Art and Album Covers
- Handout 6 - The Afrofuturistic Design of ‘Black Panther’