



In Conversation with D. Scot Miller

(29 November 2021)

by Serena I. Volpi

D. SCOT MILLER is the author of "The Afro-surreal Manifesto", published in the *San Francisco Bay Guardian* on May 20, 2009. The manifesto launched the Afrosurreal Arts Movement. Miller is a writer, teacher, and curator living in Oakland, California. He holds a degree in English composition with a minor in journalism from West Virginia State University. He is also the managing editor of *The East Bay Express*, a weekly newspaper based in Oakland, a board member of *Nocturnes* journal of literary arts, a columnist-in-residence for the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, and a contributor to numerous magazines and websites.

I met D. Scot on Skype in late November 2021. I was in my kitchen in Milan, Italy, and it was early evening for me while he was sitting on his veranda in the bright morning light of northern California. What follows is most of our one-hour conversation.

Since D. Scot is often not credited for his seminal work, I've decided to report his words as faithfully as possible with minimal interventions. I enjoyed the way in which D. Scot told his story and, in the tradition of Zora Neale Hurston, I wanted to let his voice (and not mine) come out of the page. I hope I've managed to do that.



Serena I. Volpi: Hello, D. Scot. Thank you for being here and taking the time. As a first question, I'd like to know what inspired you to write the *Afrosurreal Manifesto* back in 2009. And can you tell us a bit about the context of its genesis?

D. Scot Miller: I would say that it began around 2004. I was writing for Issue n.3 of *Nocturnes* literary review, called the "Blues Issue", and I was trying to come up with a series of poems for that issue and I stumbled across... I guess, at first, it was just a feeling, you know, I had written a couple of poems that were kind of based on the standards of the blues but I had injected in contemporary ills of the world: at the time, I was talking about the Iraq war, I was talking about George W. Bush... but I was using a much older form. And I found out that a really interesting thing to do is to take an old form and inject it with new things. So, at first, the reason why it started was the whole idea of that. Then, I started really getting into the Black radical imagination of the blues and so I started reading a lot of Robin D.G. Kelley, and Kelley brought me to Négritude, in particular his book *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination* (2002). So, I was already kind of going in that direction and I started writing this book called *Knot Frum Hear* with the idea of making a novella out of it. And when people asked me: "What kind of book is it?", I'd be like "It's kinda like science fiction, but it's not really science fiction because it's taking place in the present time; it doesn't rely heavily on technology; it has hints of the supernatural with no real supernatural in it; it makes reference to pop culture, but it also makes reference to ancient cultures at the same time. So, I don't know what to call it". I had been reading Henry Dumas most of my life, *Goodbye Sweetwater* was a book that I grew up with, and I ran across a new edition of *Echo Tree* that came out, I do believe around 2006 or so. It was an edition of *Echo Tree* that included Amiri Baraka's essay from 1974 called "Henry Dumas: Afrosurreal Expressionist", and I'd never seen that term, "Afrosurreal Expressionist", before. And I was like: "That's what I'm doing! I'm writing Afrosurreal Expressionism!" And so, I wrote for a CityLights anthology, I put in it those poems I was just telling you about. Those poems have been reprinted in this thing called *Days I Moved Through Ordinary Silence* around 2005-2006, and I said in my intro that my poems were actually Afrosurreal poems. Nobody had heard about the term Afrosurreal at all. And, in the book, I said the poems were in the Afrosurreal tradition of Henry Dumas. That was around 2005 or so and, at the same time, I was writing for *The San Francisco Bay Guardian*. I was a contributing writer there, I wrote for them pretty regularly, and I liked the term "Afrosurreal" so much that I started using it. The crazy thing is, it's pretty difficult to track it now, but back in the day I looked up "Afrosurreal" on Google and there were only two instances of someone using the word: the first one was, of course, Amiri Baraka and some people ended up quoting Baraka without giving him credit. There are a couple of articles from the 90s that use the term "Afrosurreal" without giving Baraka his credit. So, I thought that was something that probably had to be fixed, I didn't know how but I thought that if a Black man ended up creating something like that, he should get credit for it, and nobody was giving him credit for coming up with the term "Afrosurreal Expressionism". So, I started kinda like (*short pause, smiling*) putting the



word in articles: I called *Medicine for Melancholy* by Barry Jenkins an Afrosurreal movie, and Yinka Shonibare's book of his retrospective which came out in the early 2000s, I called that an Afrosurreal piece of art, and I kept doing it. And my editor (*laughs*) kept seeing the word without really knowing what it meant, and I think he did it for about two months or so, and then he came to me and said: "Hey man, I know you keep on putting this word 'Afrosurreal' in, and I haven't been able to see anything about it. I've looked it up, I have no idea: what is 'Afrosurreal'?! Dude, you gotta tell me" (*we laugh*). And so I told him about Henry Dumas, I told him about Baraka, I told him about Robin D.G. Kelley, I told him about all this research I'd been doing. It was actually research I was doing for my book, but it ended up seeping into my poetry, seeping into my journalism... It just started spreading all over the place. And after I told him about the idea, he meditated on it for a while and said: "You know what? Let's devote a whole issue to this idea and try to figure out exactly what the contours of Afrosurreal are." And so, for that issue, I wrote the *Afrosurreal Manifesto*. The reason I chose the manifesto as a form was because, as I said before, I like taking older forms and contemporizing them. That's one of the things that I really see as part of my artistic practice: I take older forms and contemporize them. So, I started studying manifestos because manifestos were late 19th-early 20th-century conventions. We're talking about Dada, we're talking about Surrealism... or Futurism. When manifestos did have an impact on artistic movements during a time when newspapers had an impact on all movements everywhere when the newspaper was actually still a thing since it was itself an invention of that era. So, I found myself working for a newspaper as we were entering the age of the Internet, as we were entering the age of social media, and I wanted to see if, just like with Marinetti's manifesto, a manifesto could have the same kind of impact from a newspaper that it did in the early 1900s (*smiles*). That was the first thing. I said, "How do I do that?" Well, I had May Ann Caws' book called *Manifesto: A Century of Isms* (2001): it is a collection of manifestos up until, I'd say, maybe *Fluxus* (George Maciunas, 1963) and I read every last one of them. It's a very thick book (*laughs*) and I read every last one of them. At the time I was working at the *San Francisco Bay Guardian*, but I was also working at CityLights in North Beach (I worked at CityLights for about six years or so) and that obviously gave me a lot of access to books (*smiles*), so I just borrowed that book because I couldn't afford to buy it. And I got an idea simply of what manifestos should have in them. Basically, what I did was take Marinetti's manifesto, and Bréton's manifesto, I also looked at Langston Hughes' "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain". What I wanted to do was formulate (*smiles*) what I call "an old-fashioned manifesto". That's what was actually in my head: "Ok, I'm going to write an old-fashioned manifesto". And so, I wrote the *Afrosurreal Manifesto* for the issue of the *San Francisco Bay Guardian* and the other thing that was really going on [at the time]... well, people don't remember what they were talking about in 2008. I remember what people were talking about in 2008. People were talking about post-race and post-Black. That was what everybody was talking about. Even Ytasha Womack, the author of *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture* (2013), published a book called *Post Black* (2010). That was her first book. That's where we were headed, but nobody seems to remember this now. Nobody seems to remember that The Studio Museum in Harlem had a show called "Post-Black". Also,



Obama had just been elected and they were saying we were living in a post-racial time and I thought that was the most silly s*it I had ever heard in my life. I thought, "We are not living in post-racial times; in fact, this is going to get worse *because* we have a Black president. It's not going to be easier". I kinda knew that Trump was about to show up; I kinda knew it, I just did. This is the way my country works: every time there's a Black advancement, there is a white backlash. And that backlash is always worse than the actual advancement that we get, so... We had a really good Black president, so we had to go through a really, really, really bad white one. You know, it's just the way this country works. That's also the reason why I've included Obama in the *Manifesto*. So, what was going on at the Harlem Studio was that they had this show called "Post-Black", and Ytasha Womack was talking about post-race, and I thought that both of those things were just terribly incorrect, and so the subtitle of my manifesto is "Black Is the New Black". The reason why I said that is because the post-Black tag was "Post-Black Is the New Black", and I was like, "No, post-Black is not the new Black. Black is the new Black". And the reason why I said that was because of Obama, and because of the fact we were already going through a demographic shift in this country where white people were about to become a minority, and we were going to see them lose their s*it for years. If you've been paying attention, this demographic shift all but guaranteed that we had to go through a Trump-like era, that we had to go back to the days of Woodrow Wilson when we were going to start seeing the Klan in the streets again. The minute that Obama got elected, that was a guarantee. And so, what I wanted to include in my manifesto was the fact that Black America already knows this. Black America already knows this. When you say we are post-Black, you are clearly not engaged with what Black people are going through in this country right now: even if you say we are post-racial, we are dealing with white supremacy and racism every day. So, I wanted to include that also in the manifesto, but even more than that, I wanted to... you know, I was hanging out with a bunch of young artists. I was not necessarily a young man myself, I was then nearly 40, but I was hanging out with a bunch of young artists because I was kinda like a mentor at CityLights. I was definitely a mentor as a writer at *San Francisco Bay Guardian*, and I was having these conversations with the young artists, and they were asking me: "I know you are not doing super well, but you know, you're a writer for a newspaper and you work at CityLights which is hella cool..." And I was, you know (*smiles*), thinking about those young people too [while writing the manifesto], and trying to give them [inspiring figures]. Something I was doing at CityLights was recommending books to people, that's the reason why the whole manifesto is pretty much rooted in 'literariness'. Not literacy, but literariness (*smiles*) because that's what I was doing. In the end, as I was working on the manifesto, by working at CityLights I got the chance to meet with Robin Kelley, sit down, and talk about it before I did it. I had a chance to meet with Amiri Baraka. I had been a fan of Baraka for years so every time he came to City, I would be there in the front row. He knew my face (*smiles*) and he also, you know, kinda knew my name. And I was like "Wow!" just because of the fact he knew who I was (*laughs*). I interviewed him for the *Guardian*, but that wasn't the important thing. The important thing was the thing that happened after the interview which was me asking him if I could use "Afrosurreal Expressionism". I wanted to give him credit. I



wanted him to get his credit after all those years in which people hadn't credited him. And I still don't know why this is... It's almost as if a Black man has to die before he gets his credit. So that's the reason why at the top of the manifesto I say "Amiri Baraka came up with the term Afrosurreal Expressionism". I say it right there because it'd been used a couple of times and nobody wanted to give him his credit, so I wanted to make damn sure he got his credit if only for San Francisco. I wasn't even thinking about a larger world. I was just thinking about San Francisco. I was thinking about the young artists of color in San Francisco, and I was thinking about the queer community in San Francisco. I'm very much engaged with the trans community here in San Francisco, that's the reason why I wanted to include all of my friends (*smiles*). And so, I talked about Asian people, I talked about the LGBTQ community, I talked about poor white people, and I said: "We're all in this together". And this is one thing that seems to be missing from how people interpreted the manifesto: I make it very clear that is a multiracial document and it's supposed to unify all of us against white supremacy, against patriarchy, against homophobia, against colonialism, capitalism, consumerism. I mean, these are the things we have to fight against and one of the things I was trying to prepare my young students for was that you must be ready to be in a sort of psychic battle against those forces at all times. And these artists that I name, and these leaders that I name, these people will teach you from beyond the grave how they survived it, how they thrived in it, how they continued to create in it, how they continued to organize in it. For example, I included William Burroughs. *Nobody* ever mentions the fact that I included William Burroughs. William Burroughs is in the *Manifesto*, and Frida Kahlo was in the *Manifesto*. And also, Frida Kahlo was not a surrealist. She was not, she hated them [the Surrealists] (*bursts into a laugh*).

Serena I. Volpi: Yes, one question I was keeping for the end of the interview was actually about Kahlo's quote which comes right at the beginning of the *Manifesto*: "I'm not a surrealist, I paint my own reality" which was an answer to Bréton's claim that her art was surreal. And she just said no, this is my reality. Was that 'no' an inspiration for your manifesto?

D. Scot Miller: Well, absolutely. But it's so funny because it was miswritten in the manifesto (*smiles*) and the reason for that is because it was a pre-Internet not allowed always. And my editor changed my line, so I had to go and get the book (*smiles*). But since we were working at a weekly newspaper, when the *Manifesto* dropped, I already had another job to do. And it was not an academic text, it wasn't meant to be. It was meant to be an artistic text. It was meant to be something that spoke to artists, almost specifically artists. And so, as much as I appreciate the academy (well, sort of, *laughs*) because the academy has taken up Afrosurrealism, let's put it that way, but it actually wasn't for the academy, it was actually for young artists and being able to be embraced by the older people, the Robin Kelleys of the world, the Wanda Colemans, the Amiri Barakas, the Ishmael Reeds. I mean, I've been mentored by some of the greatest Black writers this country has ever produced and... for the manifesto to be part of that tradition, that's what I wanted. I wanted my Manifesto to be a part of Ted Jones' *Jazz*



Manifesto, a part of Kaufman's *Abomunist Manifesto*, and a part of Ishmael Reed's *Neo-HooDoo Manifesto*. I wanted to be in that tradition. So, that was actually what the manifesto was for: the manifesto was for young artists, like myself when I was young, seeking these mentors like Ishmael Reed, like Amiri Baraka, like Wanda Coleman... you know, going out of my way asking questions, trying to understand how to survive as an artist and a writer in a world which pretty much doesn't want us to exist.

Serena I. Volpi: You've mentioned some of my favorite things about San Francisco. I lived in San Francisco for one month back in 2002, and my place was pretty close to CityLights, so I used to go there every day, and I can imagine the vibe of the place while you were working there. Walking among the signposts of the Beat Generation or all the used bookstores that were pretty much everywhere, I had the impression that one could almost breathe literature in San Francisco. And then, in 2006, I attended a Summer School in Women and Gender organized by Utrecht University at Università di Bologna, and the main theme of the Summer School was how to write a feminist manifesto. So, you and I, we were doing similar things more or less at the same time because I was reading manifestos myself, such as *The SCUM Manifesto* by Valerie Solanas. But anyway, getting back to the *Afrosurreal Manifesto*, as you said, it is artistic and it contains inspirations for younger artists. In a way, what's behind your project, reminded me of what Alice Walker did when she recovered Zora Neale Hurston's work for it to become a sort of reference for Black women writers. And that's what happened, Hurston really became a main reference for contemporary women writers and artists, and Black ones in particular. But I would like you to say a bit more about the idea of survival for Black writers and artists in a world that does not want them to exist.

D. Scot Miller: Well, I mean, as I said I think this is also true for women writers, for Asian writers... The thing that drives me crazy here in the States is, no matter what your country is, if you are an Asian woman and you write a book, they're going to put a dragon on the cover and I think that's demeaning, but I also think everybody has those kinds of crosses to bear. So, I wanted to include everyone because if you're going up against this corporate structure, you're going to run into these problems. And the things I'm pointing to are things that can help you no matter what your position is, whether you are LGBTQ, poor white, woman, Asian, Latino... You're going to run into the same problems and I want my manifesto to be able to help everybody.

Serena I. Volpi: It's interesting that those years you referred to as "post-racial", when everybody was talking about "post-Black", were also years of post-feminism, right? That was the climate.

D. Scot Miller: Exactly.

Serena I. Volpi: And, as for Afrosurrealism in the last decade, how has it changed in these thirteen years? And how has San Francisco changed? And what's the role of Afrosurrealism in this change? Because you said that you were thinking about San



Francisco while writing the manifesto and San Francisco, as I said, is a city I've loved very much since the first time I visited it when I was 24. I loved the city, but it was impossible not to see the great inequalities affecting the people in its streets. It was inescapable.

D. Scot Miller: Well, I mean, it can go two ways. I would say that since the publication of the manifesto, I've had so many talented young artists approach me, thank me. Some of them have even gone on doing some incredible things like, you know, Terence Nance, for example. He thanked me for the manifesto in 2014. Christopher Burch, an incredible visual artist, he's just finished an incredible mural here in San Francisco. Another guy, Mark Saab, came all the way from North Carolina to come to my house and moved here (*smiles*). And I helped him get his first job at the Museum of African Diaspora and now he is doing shows all over the city, he's become an incredible artist... all of them [have]. Young people, actually, from all over the world have contacted me, and... that makes me happy. But another thing just about San Francisco, Afrosurrealism in a lot of ways has broken my heart too. San Francisco broke my heart. I loved that city. I moved to San Francisco in 1993. I was 23 years old. I came with \$ 1,000 and two suitcases and got a life there. I stayed at a hostel for almost a year, a hostel in Fulton Street, as I built my life. And I was hopeful for that city. That city brought me my first wife. That city brought me my first child. And I was hopeful for that city for a long time, but when I started seeing things going downhill, I started really writing about it for the paper. It was a desperate time. I had a mentor from West Virginia who moved down here, his name was Gray Harden, and he became a reporter for *The San Francisco Examiner*. One of his primary things was studying the declining Black population for the *Examiner*, and he was doing that. As I said, when I first moved here in the mid-90s, he was my mentor, he helped me finish up my journalism minor at San Francisco State, where he taught, and then he died. And he died in 2001, I believe. Cancer. He was still a young man... maybe 51, 52. My age now. So, I took up his mantle. [The investigation of] the declining Black population in San Francisco became one of my missions in his memory. So, I wrote about *Medicine for Melancholy*, and met with Barry Jenkins, and talked with him about it because I saw the movie and I said, "Ok, this is about the decline of the Black population in San Francisco". And that piece was called "The Last Black Man in San Francisco" (*laughs*). That was the title of the piece Barry and I used to work on in a café on Mission. We are still friends, but at the time when we met in a café on Mission, he talked about when he first moved to San Francisco, he was dating a white woman and he was embraced by the city, but when they broke up, he felt like he was the last Black man in San Francisco because he lost all of his friends, he wasn't just welcomed in their circles anymore, you know what I mean... But, anyway, I've been writing about it even before I wrote the *Manifesto*. The *Manifesto* was just a continuation of that mission; the decline of the Black population: what are we going to do about it? And at the time the Black population was hovering at 3%, I think now it's like 2% going down to 1. And that's a heart-breaking thing, you know.

And, at the same time, Afrosurrealism has also been very heartbreaking because people tried to steal it from me constantly. People are constantly trying to steal this from me. There has just been a show in the UK at the Horniman Museum where they had a phrase



from my *Manifesto* on the wall and they didn't have my name attached to it. When I get in touch with them, they tell me it's a typo. And I'm like, "Ok if it's a typo, how come my name doesn't come up anywhere on your website too? Why is my name completely erased from your website?" The same happened with the *Postscript Magazine* in the UK and let's not forget Lanre Bakare and *The Guardian UK* who wrote this thing entirely based on my suite at The San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. He just took everything and gave me no credit whatsoever. None. So, there's heartbreak. Because what is funny to me (it's not funny, it's really quite frustrating) is that the reason why I put Amiri Baraka's name in the *Manifesto* was that people weren't giving that Black man credit, right?

Serena I. Volpi: And now the same is happening to you...

D. Scot Miller: Yes, the exact same thing is happening to me. It's so crazy. And this is the heartbreak part of it. It will change after I'm dead. People will acknowledge me after I'm dead. So now they're prepared to recognize Baraka because he's dead. So, they're waiting around for me to die to give me credit for this and, in the meantime, I have to put up with all kinds of people. You follow my Facebook group, you see that. All kinds of people are constantly trying to steal my idea without giving me credit for it. And the only reason for that I can think of is that I'm a Black man in America, you know. Because it's a good idea, and it's helpful, I wrote it for it to be a helpful thing, especially for young artists who are trying to find their way. And, instead, these academics have taken it and have tried to turn it into an industry, a marketplace idea if you will. They are trying to throw it into the marketplace of ideas and they can't because it's an anti-capitalist document. It's an anti-consumerist document. It's an anti-white supremacy document. And so, they have to eliminate me to turn it into what they want to turn it into which is something they can consume, something they can eat. And it's not for you, *it's not for you*, museum people. It's not for you, academics. It's for the people in the streets, for the people out there who struggle. It's an organizing factor to help all of us to keep our sanity as they continue to do their class war, race war, age war, gender war... you know, all these wars. And as for how Afrosurrealism has helped, I was just thinking about it. I'm a big fan of Marshall McLuhan (and of his son Eric too) who wrote a book called *The Book of Probes* (2003). I've always been curious about probes and I didn't realize that's what I did with the *Manifesto*. The *Manifesto* was a probe and what it has been doing has been going into all these different industries whether it's the art world or the academic world and it's probing these industries showing, unfortunately for me, the ugly side of all of them because it interrogates. When I wrote it, I knew it was meant to be an interrogation, but an interrogation of a very particular place at a very particular time: it was supposed to be an interrogation of post-race and an interrogation of San Francisco. But, as it turns out, it also became an interrogation of the museum world, the academic world. And that interrogation, apparently, they take it as a threat even though there is nothing in my *Manifesto* that is a threat at all. So, how is Afrosurrealism doing that? I don't know. But Afrosurrealism, maybe just to me (because people are ignoring me most of the time), but like I see it, I see the deception, I see the continued attempts



at [silencing me] by people like Rochelle Spencer who wrote a dissertation called *Afrosurrealism: The African Diaspora's Surrealist Fiction* (2019)... and I am like no! because it's for more than just Black people. Why do you steal my s*it (stuff) just to make it for Black people? Why do you do that? All these people do this. All of them. Ishmael Reed said it best: the reason why I keep running into this problem is because I refuse to be bigoted. You know, my family is multiracial. My family is LGBTQ. I'm talking about my family, but America wants it to be "just for Black people". People segregated. People separated. Any time there is a person, either Black or white, who says "Afrosurrealism is just for Black people", that satisfies the Beast in this country. The Beast of Segregation. And that's what everybody in this country is doing right now. When you say "Afrosurrealism is just for Black people", it is not. It's a multiracial document for my multiracial family. In a lot of ways, Afrosurrealism is still doing the work that I do every day, but in my mind, my *Manifesto* was a bit like my teenage son, you know (*smiles*). When my *Manifesto* was first coming out, I was very protective of it. If you said anything wrong or incorrect anywhere on the Internet, I didn't care, I would come up and be like "No, that's wrong!" But now my son is thirteen years old and he's capable of taking care of himself out in this world, so I'll let him go now... maybe he's gonna hang out with the wrong crowd from time to time, you know (*laughs*). That's what teenagers do, they're going to hang out with the bad crowd every once in a while. And so, I mean, that's really how I feel about how Afrosurrealism is doing. Afrosurrealism has me as the managing editor of a newspaper and [in this role] I'm still speaking truth to power. I'm still bringing contemporary change-makers to the fore for this newspaper. And I think my *Manifesto* is still doing the same thing up here in the streets too (*smiles*). It's still doing it, it's still doing the work. Because you can reinterpret the text, but the text is still the text. And that's the reason why a lot of people don't even want to talk about the text anymore, they just call it Afrosurrealism and don't even mention that it came from a manifesto. They just say "Afrosurrealism", they don't even try to describe it. They just say it because if you try to describe it, you'll have to go back to the text and the text is contradictory to what exactly you are saying.

Serena I. Volpi: So, they use the term "Afrosurrealism" vaguely because they don't go back to the text where it came from.

D. Scot Miller: Correct. Also, they ignore the big one: at the top of the *Manifesto*, it says "Afrosurrealism is not Surrealism". And this is very important because what's really going on here is that there are white people, not just in America but also in the UK, who are trying to say that Afrosurrealism is just a subset of Surrealism, seen as a thing white people came up with. There's a whole industry right out there now and that's what they are trying to say, "That's actually Surrealism with Afro- in front of it, that's all". No, Afrosurrealism is not a subset. And I say this in the *Manifesto*, but I'll say it to you again here.

Surrealism is very dependent upon ways of influencing the mind, whether it be through automatic writing, séances, or exquisite corpses, but you have to put yourself in that state of mind. And that's not a state of mind you're consistently in,



right? Afrosurrealism, according to Amiri Baraka, was the fact that we had to do with a consistently absurd reality: we had to live with the fiction of race knowing it's a fiction, but we have to treat it *as if* it's a reality. That's the reason why the Frida Kahlo's quote is right there at the top: the difference between Surrealism and Afrosurrealism is that we live in this constant absurd reality. We don't need séances, we don't need drugs, we don't need any of that. All we have to do is just be Black, or gay, or poor white, and then we get assigned certain characteristics that we know are not true but they work *as if* they are. So that's the difference between Surrealism and Afrosurrealism. And that's a vast difference. And here's another thing that drives me crazy: we make a distinction between Dada, Futurism, and Surrealism. We can even call all of these things as part of a continuity, right? But Black cultural production is not allowed to have that kind of continuity. So, Surrealism is this, then Léopold Senghor comes up and says "Well, ok, Black Surrealism is *this*", so the continuity is from Surrealism to Négritude and, from Négritude to Afrosurrealism. There is a continuity and, if you go even deeper, the Harlem Renaissance inspired Négritude, so the Harlem Renaissance jumps over Surrealism to Négritude. Surrealism is just a subset of the Harlem Renaissance and Négritude. It's a subset, so basically, Afrosurrealism is more in continuity with the Harlem Renaissance and Négritude than it is with Surrealism. I'll stop here, but before that one last thing: Amiri Baraka, when he was LeRoi Jones, was in North Beach. He was a member of the early Beat movement. And a lot of people don't know that, but he was here so there's a greater connection between the Harlem Renaissance, Négritude, the Beat movement, and Afrosurrealism than Surrealism at all.

Serena I. Volpi: Very interesting. As for me, knowing the context of that quote by Frida Kahlo, her words set the tone so I don't know how people can overlook that without considering this aspect, that is Kahlo was saying "My art is not surreal, it's my reality". And the awareness of a fictional dimension too. And this seems to me very different from the surrealist standpoint, as you said, since in Surrealism there was this constant search for the surreal while, the kind of feeling I have while reading Kahlo's words, it's that the surreal is already there, you don't have to search for it, but cope with it.

D. Scot Miller: You have to cope with it, exactly.

Serena I. Volpi: As for what you were saying about being often ignored in discussions of Afrosurrealism seems to me as part of a greater attempt at taking the artistic side of it while throwing away the political. Yes, you said "They're going to acknowledge me after my death" but the fact is, you know, that if I think about how Martin Luther King or Rosa Parks have been memorialized, they're often remembered in a 'sanitized' way so we are left with the idea of Rosa Parks as being an isolated woman refusing to leave her seat on a bus while she was part of a wider political movement and a concerted effort. And the same can be said of MLK. Because it's that collective action that scares America (and Europe too). And the same can be said for Nelson Mandela. There is a tendency of memorializing Black people, in particular, in a sanitized way because after they are dead you can do what you want with their memory and their words.



D. Scot Miller: Exactly!

Serena I. Volpi: About the distinction between Afrosurrealism and Afrofuturism, you've drawn it around a difference in time and I'm interested in it since part of my research dealt with time and its representation in ethnographic writing. You wrote that Afrosurrealism deals with the present and the past, and Afrofuturism with the future. However, in the last decade or so, Afrofuturism has expanded its borders so I would like to know if you'd still draw the same distinction between the two.

D. Scot Miller: I'd do the same (*smiles*). I think it's still the same. Let me explain how this happened. When I was on the Advisory Board of *Nocturnes* journal, we started working on that. We published the first one in 1999, but it took us maybe about four or five years to get the funding together, to get all the poets and writers together, but the seeds were planted in the mid-1990s. I'd say 1996-1997. I was working with poet Giovanni Singleton and we wanted to put together this journal. So, we had to put together a board of directors and we got our first issue out in 1999, but we had been working on it for a few years. As I was going through that process, I was talking to a bunch of writers and artists from all over the country to see if they wanted to get involved in the process. Somebody put me on Alondra Nelson's list-serv group called "Afrofuturism" and I was in that group from 1996 until it stopped in 2001-2002. As much as I enjoyed the group, and talking to people like Greg Tate, Jessica Care More, and Alondra herself, and DJ Spooky, the thing is I found our conversations were very limited because it was called "Afrofuturism" so you could easily fall off-topic. And back in the day, if you fell off-topic, you might not even be published on those [pages] because the moderator would be like "Sorry, this is off-topic". And there were things we couldn't talk about like Zora Neale Hurston, for example, because Zora is in the past. And all we were doing was talking about comic books and Lando Calrissian. And I know it wasn't them, it was the topic: Afrofuturism. We *had to* talk about the future. It was a must, we had to. So, something was missing: we couldn't talk about Ishmael Reed, we couldn't talk about Amiri Baraka, we couldn't talk about Wanda Coleman. None of these people write science fiction. The only author we discussed was Octavia Butler, that was pretty much it. And this was over and over and over again. To this day, I'd say Afrofuturism is still mostly comic books and cosplay. It still is. And I think the main reason for that is, and this is the reason why I've embraced temporality, is that because I saw that was the limitation of the movement. The limitation of the Afrofuturist movement was the fact it was limited to a temporal space: *you had to be in the future*. There were a lot of historical markers that we could not discuss. A lot of artists, thinkers, writers, and philosophers we could not discuss because they weren't dealing with the future. Robin D.G. Kelley, for example. There were a lot of people who were not science-fiction writers and who were actually deep theorists, you know. And Alondra Nelson who founded the group was interested in medical technologies and their impact on Black lives, but I am not interested in technologies. I am interested in arts, culture, and current events. So where do I go? Where do people who are not interested in science fiction fit into this? Where does Robin D.G. Kelley fit into this? Where does Aimé Césaire fit into this? Where does Suzanne Césaire fit into



this? And they didn't. They didn't fit. So that was the reason why I decided to focus on the present because there's more to talk about. And, also, it is like I said in an earlier interview, it was the "be here and now ethos" of the Bay area, we are all very much "be here and now" kinda people, you know, it's part of that hippy layover thing. It comes from the hippy days: "Hey man, be present, you gotta be present. Think in the present" (*laughs*).

Serena I. Volpi: It's very zen, I'd say (*smiles*).

D. Scot Miller: It is, yes. And also, you know, there's a spiritual component because I want to remind these people the past was awful and the future is not guaranteed, you know. So, what we have to do is to try to modify our present, we have to try to make our present lives that dream. You know, we can't wait for tomorrow to live that dream. We can't wait for tomorrow, you have to live that dream today. And then you wake up the next day and you live that dream today. And then you wake up the next day and you live that dream today, you know. And that is something I think it's really important. And it's funny, I got it from Frantz Fanon. In *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952) he says that the past in no way dictates our current situation: the past was awful, but we have to make sure our present isn't. So that was part of it too. I also think that's where art comes from. You could be inspired by art from the past, but I think your art is actually the place where you are right now even if you try to capture something from the past or capture something from the future, you're trying to do that right now. So that's really where you should be, there's only one place you can be, and that's here. And you're right, Lao Tsu said it too: he said that if you concentrate too much on the past, you become despaired and if you focus too much on the future, you become anxious. So, it's best to stay in the present moment as much as you can. And I found that really good advice and that's the kind of advice I want to hand down to younger artists so that's the reason why I set that focus.

Serena I. Volpi: What you say is thought-provoking. I started being interested in Afrofuturism in 2014, you know. At the time, I had just finished my PhD and I was looking for funds to work on it for my postdoc but I couldn't find any. And it was a good time to work on that because it was not very well known in Europe, not even in the UK where I was studying (if we still want to consider it part of Europe, *smiles*). But I find what you said about Afrofuturism's relationship with time so stimulating because my interest in it actually came from a concern with the past and, more specifically, with the Harlem Renaissance and twentieth-century cultural anthropology.

D. Scot Miller: I love your observations; Robin Kelley said something to me [that connects to that] about Léopold Senghor's romanticization of an African past. He said that the only way Senghor could romanticize an African past is through the African liberation projects that happened before he started doing it. Sometimes the only way something can open up is by reaction (*smiles*). In a lot of ways, my *Afrosurreal Manifesto* is reactive and not just reactive to Afrofuturism but is also blatantly reactive



to futurism. Certain lines in the *Manifesto* are just reversed lines from Marinetti. I mean, I took a line from Marinetti's manifesto and just reversed it. There's something about the fact they respected the ancients and the ancestors... well, they *didn't* (smiles), so that was actually a line and I just flipped it. And here's another thing, Futurism itself – as a concept – not in artistic terms, but we both know what Futurism was, you know, we both know that... and, unfortunately, I've started to see the same kind of behaviors coming from Afrofuturism, right? For example, Mark Dery came up with the term Afrofuturism and yes, he's white, but he got credited for coming up with the term. You just don't go around stealing stuff from people like that [as they did with me] and if you think that's okay, that makes you part of that problem. And that makes you part of that fascist machine, right? And, as Black people, you don't want to be part of that fascist machine... but yet, here we are. And here's another example: the *Manifesto* says that *Black Panther* will be coming out as a movie. It's the second last line in the thing, right? *Black Panther* is not Afrofuturism. It's not. It takes place in the past. And the reason why I thought *Black Panther* would make a great movie is because I'm an anti-fascist. Anti-colonial and anti-fascist and, growing up, I read *Black Panther*. He had a run. And, in that run, *Black Panther* is anti-colonial and anti-fascist fighting against the Nazis and the KKK. That's what he was and that's what made him my childhood hero (smiles). But then, they take this movie and they make the white guy, who's a C.I.A. operative, shoot down a bunch of weapons going to Black liberation projects at the end of the movie. It's a colonial movie. It's a pro-fascist movie. So, here's the thing: that makes it Afrofuturist, but what doesn't make it Afrofuturist is its temporality. Its temporality is contemporary times, but slightly in the past and the way they did that is by having a series of catchphrases in it that only came from the Internet during a particular point in the recent past. So, basically, that's why I think Afrofuturism is slowly creeping towards fascism since an anti-colonial, anti-fascist superhero can be taken and turned into a pro-colonial, pro-fascist superhero. The movie ends with Wakanda colonizing Oakland. That's how it ends! [...] So, the way I look at *Black Panther* is that *Black Panther* the comic I used to read as a child still exists, but that movie is just plain out fascism.

Serena I. Volpi: I have to admit that I didn't enjoy the movie much myself especially because I had problems with the representation of Africa in it, for example, the idea that hyper-technological Wakanda is over-protective with its resources and the relationship between Africa and Afro-America as represented in the character of Erik Killmonger. In my view, there were also attempts at reversing colonial dynamics between the United States and Africa ascribing a colonialist attitude to Wakanda and, so doing, covering up the historical impact of Western countries in African politics. Basically, a rewriting and a reversal of the historical roles.

D. Scot Miller: Exactly. And, as for me as an Afrosurrealist, what I was hoping for was that Marvel would stay true to the comic books. But that just didn't happen. And I think there's corporate fascism behind this.



Serena I. Volpi: And since we're talking about politics, my next question deals with the relationship between Afrosurrealism and activism. Can you tell me a bit more about this? I'm thinking, for example, about "Dark Night of the Stole", the piece you wrote with Steven Tavares which was awarded the prestigious California Journalism Awards honor for "Coverage of Protests and Racial Justice-News or Feature Team Reporting".

D. Scot Miller: Because of where I'm from, I'm from Oakland and San Francisco, California, but born in D.C. and raised in West Virginia, I come from direct action. I come from strikes, that's where I come from: I come from Coleman's strikes, workers' strikes, and protests on Capital steps. I come from direct engagement. I vote, yes, I do that too. But what I was trying to do with my *Manifesto*, and also with anything I do in my life, is encourage direct engagement. I believe that if you can find and see the power, you should go there. It shouldn't be symbolic. It shouldn't be just representational. If you're trying to affect change, go where you can affect that change, and affect that change.

Serena I. Volpi: A manifesto for younger artists, but also a call to action.

D. Scot Miller: Yes (*nods*).

Serena I. Volpi: So, if you had to write the *Manifesto* today, after George Floyd's murder and the *Black Lives Matter* protests, how would these recent events affect your way of writing it? And how is all this affecting your view of the *Manifesto*?

D. Scot Miller: You know, I couldn't have written the *Manifesto* after those things. Well, I wrote it after [police officer] Johannes Mehserle killed Oscar Grant at the beginning of 2009 and Marcel Diallo was harassed and detained by the police in front of his house in Oakland in the same year... but, really, as a Black American, that's a pretty regular occurrence. At the time, though, we didn't have videos, y'know, we didn't have documentation like Eric Garner or George Floyd. What we had was a grainy video of this poor guy prone on a subway platform getting shot in the back of the head. But it was grainy. And this whole aspect in this country has been 'grainy' this entire time. You know, this is the first time we get to see this in high-res, full color. And I'm talking about the whole history of anti-Black violence in this country: it's always been grainy. It's always been fuzzy. And because what I wanted to do was highlight the voyeurs, you know, that's what I was trying to do. Highlighting the voyeurs. And now people can see it. When I wrote the *Manifesto*, people didn't see it. And they were talking about post-race, post-Black, as I said earlier. And that's the thing I was railing against, it was the fact that no, it's just grainy. It's still very much out there, it's still very much present. It's just *grainy*. So don't talk to me about post-race, don't talk to me about post-Black, because Black people get shot every day. We read about it, we just don't see it. But don't tell me that is not happening. Don't tell me that we got beyond it. Well, you see, now it's become part of the public conversation. And so, if I were that 39-year-old man right now, I wouldn't even see Afrosurrealism as a possibility. I wouldn't even see it as something to write about at all because I was busy railing against the full-color image we can see right now. It's not a grainy image anymore. Now it's full color, so I can be full



color. I just can come out and talk directly about the problem. We are not post-race. We are not post-Black. I don't think anybody thinks that anymore, you know. So Black is the new Black is now the truth while before was just an assertion.

Serena I. Volpi: It's pretty strange to think that time could be seen as post-race when you could have entire movies or tv series without a Black person or with only very few Black characters. For example, productions set in New York City without a Black person in the cast...

D. Scot Miller: Yeah... what kind of New York was that?! Is there a special door I have to go through to get to white New York?! (*laughs*). Anyway, I think that those things, if not changing, people are more aware of them now. At least, of what they were when I was writing my history. You know, people were trying to be very Pollyanna with my history, and very Pollyanna with my body, and they were telling me that even if I couldn't find any stable employment in San Francisco, that had nothing to do with my race. Because we were post-racial. There must have been some kind of inherent flaw, maybe genetic (*smiles, ironically*). Right? That is the reason why I couldn't find a job even though I had a degree. I couldn't find a job even as a waiter in San Francisco. I was on Welfare, I was working three jobs. And, also, on food stamps because nobody would give me full-time employment. And people way less educated than me had way better jobs, and they were saying "You know, that's because there's something inherently flawed about you. It's you, it's your problem. There's something wrong with you as an individual that makes it so that you can't get ahead in this world". And that was a thing I was fighting against. And that's the reason why, in my *Manifesto* (it's subdued, but it's in there), there's a gigantic "F*ck you" to that. And it's when I say "Don't take those little degrading jobs. Don't let them turn you into a McDonald's employee. Don't let them do that. If you have a skill, you become an independent contractor". And that's what I did. I was an independent contractor. And it took me a long time to build my business up, right, but I knew I wouldn't have been able to get a job. The only thing I was able to get was waitlisted staff. And I refused the waitlisted staff. It is better to become a highly-paid short time commodity than a lowly-paid long-term one. Because then you're just a slave. I said it there. And the other thing is to have a cold tongue and a heartless heart. What I meant by that, and I hope people don't read that wrong, but what I was saying was that this machine does not love you. This machine does not love you. So, you have to enter that machine with the same lack of love that machine is giving you. Don't let any company tell you that we are family. You're not family. The minute you die, they're going to find somebody else and replace you in less than a day. So, approach those things that way, don't go in there thinking it's Pollyanna, it's not. So, you go in with the same kind of predatory instinct that they have. Because, whether you know it or not, you're in constant conflict, so prepare yourself for it.

Serena I. Volpi: It sounds like America is more prone to believe in karma than acknowledging its problems with race and class.



D. Scot Miller: Exactly (*laughs*). You know, it's so funny, I've been the managing editor of the *East Bay Express* for two years now and I could have done this job twenty years ago. I had the skill, I'd been working in a newspaper since I was a teenager. I've always had the skills but it had to be a confluence of very bad things for me to get my break. It had to be on the cusp of Covid, it had to be on the cusp of the newspaper being transitioned from one company to another... I mean, there were a lot of things that had to literally turn upside down for me to get my due.

Serena I. Volpi: Well, I'm glad that in the end, you're getting your due. Looking at your Facebook group, and seeing how often your work is not credited, I'm happy to hear that at least your work as a journalist is being rewarded. And I hope your contribution to Afrosurrealism and the arts will get its due too.

D. Scot Miller: I just want to say thank you for all the years of support. I appreciate your work and your research. I truly appreciate you. And thank you also for taking the time for this. And much love.

Serena I. Volpi: Thank you, D. Scot. Much love to you and your family. Thank you again.

WORKS CITED

- Baraka, Amiri. "Henry Dumas: Afro-Surreal Expressionist." *Black American Literature Forum*, vol. 22, no. 2, Summer 1988, pp. 164-166.
- Caws, May Ann. *Manifesto: A Century of Isms*. University of Nebraska Press, 2001.
- Césaire, Aimé, and René Depestre. "On Négritude." *Symposium of the Whole: A Range of Discourse Toward an Ethnopoetics*, edited by Jerome and Diane Rothenberg, University of California Press, 1983, pp. 52-55.
- Dumas, Henry. *Ark of Bones and Other Stories*. Random House, 1974.
- . *Echo Tree: The Collected Short Fiction of Henry Dumas*. Coffee House Press, 2003.
- Fanon, Frantz. *Black Skin, White Masks*. Grove Press, 2008.
- Hurston, Zora Neale. *Tell My Horse: Voodoo and Life in Haiti and Jamaica*. Harper Collins, 1990.
- Jones, Ted. *A Black Manifesto in Jazz Poetry and Prose*. Calder Publications Limited, 1971.
- Kelley, Robin D.G. *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination*. Beacon Press, 2003.
- Marinetti, Filippo Tommaso. *The Manifesto of Futurism*. Passerino Editore, 2016.
- McLuhan, Marshall. *The Book of Probes*. Gingko Press, 2003.
- Miller, D. Scot. *Afrosurreal Manifesto: Black is the New Black – A 21st Century Manifesto*, 2009. <https://sfbgarchive.48hills.org/sfbgarchive/2009/05/19/call-it-afro-surreal/>. Accessed 2 Feb. 2024.



Miller, D. Scot, and Steven Tavares. "Dark Night of the Stole." *East Bay Express*, 3 June 2020. <https://eastbayexpress.com/dark-night-of-the-stole-1/>. Accessed 26 Dec. 2021.

Reed, Ishmael. "Neo-HooDoo Manifesto/The New HooDoo Aesthetic." *Symposium of the Whole: A Range of Discourse Toward an Ethnopoetics*, edited by Jerome and Diane Rothenberg, University of California Press, pp. 417-421.

Sénghor, Léopold Sédar. "Speech and Image: An African Tradition of the Surreal." *Symposium of the Whole: A Range of Discourse Toward an Ethnopoetics*, edited by Jerome and Diane Rothenberg, University of California Press, pp. 119-120.

Solanas, Valerie. *SCUM Manifesto*. Verso Books, 2016.

Spencer, Rochelle. *Afrosurrealism: The African Diaspora's Surrealist Fiction*. Routledge, 2019.

Walker, Alice. *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2004.

Womack, Ytasha. *Post Black: How a New Generation is Redefining African American Identity*. Chicago Review Press, 2010.

Womack, Ytasha. *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture*. Chicago Review Press, 2013.

Serena I. Volpi holds a PhD in English from Brunel University London. She is lecturer in Anthropology at Lorenzo de' Medici, The Italian International Institute, Florence, and a postdoctoral fellow in English and American Studies at Roma Tre University, Rome. She has published on ageing in Zora Neale Hurston's and Alice Walker's novels, Katherine Dunham's ethnography of the Caribbean, Sherman Alexie and Afrofuturism, and Italian colonialism in Francesca Melandri's novel *Sangue giusto* (2007). Her book *Heading South with Zora Neale Hurston and Langston Hughes*, co-authored with Adriano Elia, was published in 2021.

<https://orcid.org/0009-0006-3766-1277>

serena.volpi@lorenzodemedici.it
