

Dabbling in the Dark: The Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow of the Black Speculative Aesthetic

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Abstract: This curriculum unit is designed to serve as an academic introduction to the genre of Black speculative art for middle school students. Through an exploration of the literature of W.E.B. DuBois, the art of Kehinde Wiley, the music of Janelle Monae and the television adaptation of the Black Lightning comic series by Salim Akil and Mara Brock Akil, this unit is designed as a survey study of speculative, visionary and science fiction aesthetics.

One of the biggest misconceptions about people of color is that we do not have far-reaching imaginations. There is a wide-sweeping misinterpretation that we do not and cannot imagine the future because we are mired in the daily struggles pertaining to race, class, gender, sexuality, religion, etc. These daily challenges of safety, violence, substance abuse and social injustices of all kinds are believed to prohibit our individual and collective imaginations. However, it is these mundane hindrances that make science fiction and fantastic art forms so crucial for the social, economic and political “other.” Racism and bigotry has long excluded people of color from canonical literature. Despite the fact that the racial and cultural demographics of students educated in America’s cities are largely nonwhite, the vast majority of “classic” Western literature that is included in many of the nation’s curricula are the works of American and European authors that are white and male. These white and often male-dominated narratives leave little to no room for the stories of non-white characters nor do they adequately consider the concerns and ideas that are specific to their communities. Relegated to the margins, these characters are often stereotyped and merely serve as ornaments of politically correct artistic decorum or in some cases are outright and unabashedly rejected for their divergence from the mainstream, preconceived depictions that have been standardized in the mainstream and popular culture.

Challenging the white, male-dominated narrative that is built on the insidious and persistent nuances of racism and all of its obvious and subtle iterations in America and other postcolonial locales around the globe. Many of our society's greatest advancements have come from the speculative imagination and the collective human imagination. Many institutions in our society have and continue the practice of excluding traditionally marginalized people. The world of literature and art are avenues for creative expression and imagining ways of addressing the social injustices and problems that plague our world and perpetuate oppression. In the least, Toliver’s work with Deep Center in Savannah Georgia suggests that the largely untapped academic engagement with the science fiction/fantasy genre offers a safe lens for students to engage with circumstances that are too incendiary and too painful to address in traditional, nonfiction discourse. Imagined methods in imagined worlds creates a safe and relatively distant space for

black and brown children to engage with the pain and brutality of racism, bigotry and discrimination. In her TED interview from 2017, TV producer Shonda Rhimes states, “I think the interesting thing that happens when you look at the world through another lens, when you’re not the person normally in charge of things, it just comes out a different way. Rhimes makes this comment in response to the entertainment world’s notion that she casts for roles in her hit TV series *Grey’s Anatomy* using a special or innovative method. Her observation is a salient point for why it is critical to include the perspectives and imaginings of the marginalized. It is through this often unheard voice that innovative solutions might be fashioned and even more importantly that humanity might be reconsidered, reworked and reimaged.

In light of the recent deaths of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arberry and a host of other black bodies that extend into the annals of history that have been killed and brutalized at the hands of injustice, this curriculum unit is an essential mechanism for the realization of racial equality as our nation individually and collectively vows to take an active role in creating a more just and fair world. While the narrative of violence and excessive force/brutality against communities of color is not a new tale, the frustration and fatigue of many global citizens with the redundancy of this narrative clearly needs a different focus and a different impetus. Employing the assertion of critical race theorists, the analysis, evaluation and creation of speculative works by the marginalized members of communities who have historically been neglected, abused and misrepresented in the Western aesthetic are essential in achieving liberation for communities who have been oppressed and disenfranchised. The cultivation of counterstories that are narrated by people of color about people of color is essential for real social and political progress to be realized. Often in the limited cases where people of color have been incorporated into mainstream narratives written by White authors/producers alongside White characters in various visual media, problems have arisen. Thomas suggests, “The problem occurs when contemporary literature and media for young people include characters of color who are supposed to provide someone for every reader or viewer [or listener] to identify with--and yet at the same time construct protagonists who are the only characters worth rooting for. Although the initial authorial intent may have been noble, stories constructed in such a fashion have the pernicious effect of normalizing our existing social hierarchies--including hierarchies of race (59).

Rooted in the horror of racism, African Americans have long speculated about the possibilities associated with the future. Author and educator Tananrive Due suggests, “Black history is black horror,” in the 2019 Shudder documentary *Horror Noire: A History of Black Horror*. From the painful remnants of African enslavement to the domestic terrorism unleashed on emancipated Blacks during the post-Civil War era known as Reconstruction through the adoption of Jim Crow and the tumult of the Civil Rights Movement, a revolution that is eerily visible in the present day, Black Americans have existed and evolved under the specter of a different kind of Boogeyman. The social construct of racism has long been the root of all horror faced by Black

people; however, the horror is not simply confined to a 120 minute film reel. The horror that African American people face lives and breathes in every decision that we make from where we choose to live, work, eat, shop, vacation, relax, learn, drive, speak, love, worship and the list goes on. The culture of racism consciously and subconsciously has dictated basic, daily decision making has co-opted the collective will of Black America and coerces the Black psyche at every turn.

Nigerian author Chris Abani suggests that we as people learn how to be human through cultural aesthetics/art. The very concept of humanity is understood through storytelling. Actor Ken Foree affirms this idea in *Horror Noire* when he comments that the D.W. Griffith film *The Birth of a Nation*, a propaganda film that has been cited as one of if not the first race film in American history which critics argued glorified and served as an indirect recruitment medium for the rise in membership in the domestic terrorist group known as the Ku Klux Klan, was the only portrayal of a black man that many white people would encounter. It did not help matters when the film was promoted as being based in fact rather than created in the imagination of a filmmaker. Scholar Robin Mead Coleman suggests that this one narrative set the standard for what Black lives and Blackness looks like. In effect, the depiction of Gus in this film became a prototype of the 20th century for America's understanding of Black people, particularly Black men. This and all other portrayals of Black people, or any marginalized people, was crafted by Western aesthetics and has shaped the beliefs that many people have adopted about members of society that are outside of the social groups of people that they may normally interact with. In a sense, popular culture has shaped the way the world views Black people and other groups that have historically been excluded from mainstream culture or included in very limited or restricted capacities. For example, Black people have been included in the mainstream as athletes and musicians. However, this inclusion comes with limited visibility, mobility and vociferousness. For example, many criticized Colin Kaepernick and other celebrity protestors who are expected to play football or remain in their respective domains, be satisfied with being rich and remain silent about police brutality in the Black community. Abani goes on to state about the African aesthetic that, "We are squandering the most valuable resource we have on this continent and that is the imagination. I am no longer interested in the proliferation of African tales in the West. I am more concerned about the stories we tell about ourselves." These counterstory depictions of blackness were evident in the 1940s and 1950s in films created by Spencer Williams and Oscar Micheaux until the advent of the science fiction film era that accompanied the world's space exploration. Then Blackness was not represented by White or Black actors, but by monsters and other worldly creatures in films such as *Night of the Living Dead*. Even in this instance where the Black male portrays the hero of the film, he is shot dead after saving his White co-stars by the police because he is armed and perceived to be dangerous. To Abani's point, the concern at present must be with the stories that are being written by Black people about Black people. As Thelma Golden, curator of the Studio Museum in Harlem states [we must] focus on artists who think about and rewrite history and create new spaces to tell new stories.

This curriculum unit is a missing cornerstone for the student population at George Washington Carver High School for Engineering and Science and in many other schools across the country that serve a similar demographic. Carver's student population consists primarily of Black and Brown students. Although This concentration of students of color indicates that there is a similar need to examine the mainstream narratives in order to uncover and reshape the existing narratives about marginalized people.

Often in my experience working as a teacher in “neighborhood” schools in North Philadelphia, “relevant” texts selected for reading have focused on certain typified characters as described by scholar Ebony Elizabeth Thomas in *The Dark Fantastic: Race and the Imagination from Harry Potter to the Hunger Games* as, “Black characters [that] are often trapped in narratives about slavery, Civil Rights, ghetto survival, or survival in the White world” (55). While I acknowledge the merit in the desire and relative cultural sensitivity/acumen in selecting texts that possess some of the elements of life found in some lower income neighborhoods in parts of Philadelphia and other urban metropolises across the country and perhaps the world at large, careful consideration must be given to not pigeonhole young readers of color into these narrow narratives. It is equally essential that the dark fantastic and all of its art forms be used to expose then imagine solutions for the injurious machinations that perpetuate injustice and inequality. It is critical to expose and expand the imaginative intellect/genius of students of color and other marginalized youth through a critical examination and academic engagement with a range of expression on the futuristic spectrum, and in the context of this curricular unit specifically the lens of Afrofuturism. Scholar and artist Ytasha Womack suggests that Afrofuturism is looking at the future through a Black lens and includes aesthetics such as literature, music, visual art, film and dance. These tenets of Afrofuturism have a rich and abundant tradition in the cultural evolution of the African diaspora.

Through the Black speculative aesthetic, a new discourse can be created. Titus Kaphar describes the focus of his work when he states in his 2017 TED Talk, “I want to make paintings...I want to make sculptures that are honest, that wrestle with the struggles of our past, but speak to the diversity and the advances of our present.” Afrofuturist Nnedi Okorafor cites her Nigerian roots as the source of inspiration for her science fiction writing. The scope of this curriculum unit will task students with analyzing and evaluating Afrofuturism in Science Fiction, Fantasy, Visionary and Speculative art forms including visual art, music, film/television, and music with the possibility of exploring other genres such as fashion and dance as part of extension activities as the teacher sees fit. Through examining these four artistic genres, students will learn to identify and define relevant terms rooted in speculative art forms and Afrofuturistic expression including the following:

- Afrofuturism

- Science Fiction/Science Fiction Fantasy

- Urban Fantasy

Fantasy
Speculative Fiction/Art
Visionary Art/Fiction
Magical Realism

Additionally, students will explore the historical context and evolution of speculative and Afrofuturistic expression in the aforementioned genres over the course of a two-week period with the following instructional objectives explored:

- Students will be able to define key literary terms specific to the explored genres
- Students will be able to describe/explain/analyze the elements of speculative art
- Students will be able to evaluate the attributes of a “hero/herione”
- Students will be able to compare and contrast heroic characters and evaluate their quality as representative of a particular marginalized group.
- Students will be able to create their own speculative/science fiction pieces in at least one of the explored genres.
- Students will be able to justify the validity of their own Afrofuturistic and speculative pieces based on the knowledge gained over the course of the unit.

Content Objectives: The scope of this curriculum unit is intended to examine

- 1) The characteristics of Black speculative art and its subgenres
- 2) The presence of Black speculative thought in literature, art, music and television
- 3) The value of speculative art forms as a viable medium for liberating oppressed peoples
- 4) The power of speculative art and science fiction as a medium for the imaginings of oppressed populations

Teaching Strategies: The teaching strategies that this curriculum unit seeks to utilize the following teaching tools in this curriculum unit:

- 1) Jigsaw
- 2) Gallery Walk
- 3) Think-Pair-Share
- 4) Read Alouds
- 5) Text Rendering
- 6) Shared Reading
- 7) Collaborative Discussion
- 8) Observer-Response Journal (a variation of the reader response journal)

Students will also respond to questions that can be answered independently or addressed in a class discussion. The lessons that are proposed in this curriculum unit explores the work of W.E.B. DuBois, Kehinde Wiley, Janelle Monae, Tony Isabella and Trevor von Eeden. The rationale behind using the work of W.E.B. DuBois is to ground the unit in a traditional literary text. DuBois was a leading Black scholar and has contributed tremendously to Black

philosophical thought. In a similar fashion, incorporating the artistry of Kehinde Wiley serves as a means of reclaiming classical art and recasting contemporary Black people in the traditional western aesthetic. Given that Black people were almost invisible in classic Western art, and according to artist and activist Titus Kaphar, are often treated as an aside in art history education, Wiley's recasting of ordinary Black people in these reimaginings of classic, Western masterpieces makes a profound and empowering statement. Wiley modernizes antiquity by symbolically elevating Black people to the socioeconomic status of the subjects of classic art who were rich and powerful people. As a result of his work, Black images have been immortalized in works of art that garner five and six figure sums when sold. Including the music and cinema of Janelle Monae allows music and popular culture to teach science fiction. Monae's use of science fiction is a great example of how the speculative and science fiction aesthetic can serve as a means of liberating those who are oppressed as a result of racial, gender, or sexual identity. Monae's work exemplifies how science fiction and fantasy can strengthen and empower a self identified "queer, Black woman." Finally, the inclusion of the Black Lightning comic series allows students to examine a white man's creation of a Black superhero and see how that character(s) is adapted for television by a contemporary Black male producer and a contemporary Black female producer. The series not only focuses on Black Lightning as a hero, but also on his daughters who are also superheroes and serve as his partners in many respects. His daughter Anissa is in a same-sex relationship and becomes an integral part of Black Lightning's operations. As a culminating activity, students will be asked to create an original work of art in the speculative/science fiction tradition. Using the knowledge gained from this curriculum unit and the examples from the works studied, students will imagine a narrative that will be expressed as a work of art, literature, music, or video/film

Reader Response Theory suggests that a work of art is experienced when the observer makes meaning from the text. For the duration of this curriculum unit, students will keep an adapted form of a reader-response journal called an observer-response journal. Reader-response journals are employed by some language arts teachers as an instructional tool while reading texts. In these observer-response journals, students will record their initial thoughts and reactions to the art, music, literature and television art pieces that are included in this curriculum unit. By the end of this unit, students will be able to produce one work of art through an Afrofuturist lens in art, literature, music or film/video. These original works made in the speculative tradition will address the unit's essential questions:

Unit Essential Questions

- 1) How does race/racism impact Black speculative art and its subgenres?**
- 2) What are common elements of speculative and science fiction aesthetics?**
- 3) How can speculative and science fiction art serve as a means of liberation for marginalized people?**

Observer Response Journal Sheet

Note: These sheets can be duplicated to create students' Observer-Response Journals.

Title of the Work:
Artist's Name:
One image that stuck out to me from this work was
I chose this image because
Another image that stuck out to me in this work was
I chose this image because
These images/ideas help me realize
These images/ideas make me wonder about

Word Analysis Chart

Name _____

Directions: For each vocabulary word find 3 synonyms, 3 antonyms and write 1 sentence for each vocabulary word in the designated boxes.

Word:

Definition:

Synonyms

1)	2)	3)
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Antonyms

1)	2)	3)
----	----	----

Sentence

_____ _____ _____

Word:

Definition:

Synonyms

1)	2)	3)
----	----	----

Antonyms

1)	2)	3)
----	----	----

Sentence

_____ _____ _____

Name _____

Guided Practice/Collaborative Practice-Reading Response Questions

For today's lesson we will read "The Comet," and as we read, please track the words and actions of Jim and Julia.

- 1) What do we learn about how Jim feels about himself?

- 2) What can you infer about Jim's social status based on what we learn in the third full paragraph?

- 3) What is the irony of Jim being sent down to the vaults by the president?

- 4) What difference do you see in the description of the dead bodies in Manhattan versus those that are lying in the streets in Harlem?

5) After they attempt to make contact with someone outside of New York City, what thoughts are running through Julia's mind?

6) After they return to the tower, how does Julia's thoughts/attitude towards Jim begin to shift?

7) Why does Julia describe Jim as the "great All-Father of the race to be"?

Summary Analysis: How does this short story by DuBois speculate about race and race relations in Jim and Julia's New York. Please cite evidence from the text that supports your claim.

Art Lesson

Name _____

Objective: Students will be able to engage in a collaborative discussion in order to analyze the social and political themes and symbols in Kehinde Wiley’s artwork.

Warm Up: (Note* Teacher should find an image(s) of Kehinde Wiley’s work to display for students to observe and write about.) Look at these images. Describe what you see and how aspects of this painting makes you feel. Use specific details from the image.

Materials: *Kehinde Wiley: An Economy of Grace*, reading handouts/organizer, images of Kehinde Wiley’s paintings

Guided Practice/Collaborative Practice

For today’s lesson, we will watch a documentary about the conceptualization of Kehinde Wiley’s art exhibit titled *An Economy of Grace*. Please complete the accompanying information tracker as we view the film to prepare for our collaborative discussion.

- 1) What is significant about Wiley’s approach to his works of art? How does he recruit models for his portraits?

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- 2) How does Wiley situate his subjects in his works of art historically and culturally? Hint* What happens after he finds his models? How do the portraits get created?

- 3) In *An Economy of Grace*, Wiley describes an exoticism that he sees in media culture. What is exoticized to him that is not so foreign?

- 4) Why is the exhibit featured in this film unique? How is this group of paintings different from his other paintings?

- 5) What political statement(s) is Wiley trying to make in creating paintings in the manner he does? How is his work innovative?

- 6) What do we learn about the sociopolitical aspects of classic art?

- 7) As you watch the film, make notes on the impact of participating in the creation of this exhibit has had on these women? How does this dismantle how they feel society sees them? What about this experience is liberating for Black people? This response should be in paragraph form. Use paraphrases that capture their feelings and thoughts.

8) How has painting/art served as a medium of liberation for him personally?

9) What is ironic about the fact that Wiley is soliciting a top fashion house to make the gowns for the shoot? How do some of the designers named by his staff make themselves off limits to large portions of the Black population?

10) There is a moment in the film when the narrator describes the idea of haute couture being the state of being pristinely beautiful. In what ways do each of the women define or redefine that statement?

Woman #1

Woman #2

Woman #3

Woman #4

Woman #5

Reflection Question: How does Wiley's work fit into the Black Speculative aesthetic?

Note to teacher* To save time in viewing, you may consider cutting the segment of the film from about 36:28-46:16. The portion of the film that shows the painting in China could be cut and not affect the lesson activities.

Music Lesson

Name _____

Objective: Students will be able to make connections to texts and analyze images in Janelle Monae’s music.

Materials: Copies of *Many Moons* song lyrics, *Many Moons* music video, *Many Moons* audio recording, Observer-Response Journals, copies of additional Janelle Monae song lyrics and audio or video recordings (please see note below)

Warm Up: Consider the kind of music you have heard in your life. What purpose does music serve? What kinds of music are important to you and why?

Guided Practice/Collaborative Practice

During today’s class we will read the lyrics to Janelle Monae’s song *Many Moons* as we listen to the audio recording. Record your initial thoughts/responses to the song in your Observer-Response journal.

Now we will watch the music video for *Many Moons*. As we watch the video, take mental note of some of the images and words presented that stand out to you. Then respond to the following question:

What is the overall message of Monae’s song/video? Please be sure to cite evidence from the video and song lyrics to support your answer.

On your own, please read the lyrics of the selected Janelle Monae song as you listen to the audio recording. Highlight any interesting words or phrases that you encounter. Complete one page for this song and its lyrics in your Observer-Response journal. (I suggest Dance or Die and Q.U.E.E.N.)

Together we will watch excerpts of Janelle Monae’s emotion picture *Dirty Computer*. (Teachers, please note that this film cannot be shown without editing due to explicit/suggestive lyrics in some songs. The storyline between the songs should be shown along with select songs from the album. The suggested songs to include are Crazy, Classic Life and Americans from this album. Other songs may be screened and used in place of these choices at the teacher’s discretion.) After watching the film, add your reaction to your Observer-Response journal.

Lesson Plan-Film and TV

Name _____

Objective: Students will be able to answer comprehension questions after comparing and contrasting characterization in literature and a television adaptation.

Materials: Black Lightning comics (for this lesson Numbers 6 & 7 were used but other volumes could be used also), Observer-response journal, Chart Paper, Markers, Tape

Warm Up: Please scan the copies of your Black Lightning comic book. Write down 3 “I see” statements and 3 “I wonder” statements. Turn and talk to your elbow partner and share one statement from each column. Each pair should be prepared to share your findings.

<u><i>I See</i></u>	<u><i>I Wonder</i></u>
I see	I wonder
I see	I wonder
I see	I wonder

Guided Practice/Collaborative Work: We will read Black Lightning comic books in small groups. There should be one group for each character. Each group should select members of the group to be the recorder, the reporter, the materials assistant, the task manager, and the timekeeper by selecting one of the Group Role Cards. Each member should have only one of these roles.

Each group will read the given Black Lightning comic book, completing as much information as possible on your group’s assigned character. As you read, please complete the Character Chart for your given character (see Character Chart sheet below):

- 1) Jefferson Pierce

- 2) Black Lightning
- 3) Syonide
- 4) Tobias Whale
- 5) Peter Gambi
- 6) Lynn Stewart
- 7) Two Bits

All information learned from the comic book should be recorded in the left column. After conferring with your group please decide what information you will include collectively on the final draft of the character chart then transfer this information to the character chart that is to be recorded on the chart paper. This character chart will serve a resource for the class for the next lesson.

Once the final draft of the character chart is complete, please use the tape provided to hang your character chart in the designated area. Each reporter will present their group's character in a 1-minute presentation.

After character chart presentations are completed, organize students into groups (the same reading groups could be used), and allow students who read different volumes of the Black Lightning series to add details about the characters to the left column of the charts (Gallery Walk).

*Note to teacher: Keep final drafts of charts posted in a designated area of the classroom for use in a subsequent lesson.

Group Role Cards

Directions: Print and copy these role cards. Cut them along the lines and

<p>Task Manager</p> <p><i>Keeps the group focused on the task so that the activity is completed.</i></p>	<p>Reporter</p> <p><i>Presents the group's ideas/findings to the whole group or class</i></p>
<p>Recorder</p> <p><i>Writes down or types the group's ideas in whatever format has been assigned to the group.</i></p>	<p>Materials Assistant</p> <p><i>Retrieves whatever materials are needed from the teacher in order for the group to complete the task.</i></p>
<p>Time Keeper</p> <p><i>Makes sure that the group completes the task in the allotted time. Reminds the group of how many minutes are left.</i></p>	

Black Lightning Character Cards

Directions: Please cut out each strip and provide one character card to each group.

Jefferson Pierce

Black Lightning

Syonide

Tobias Whale

Peter Gambi

Two Bits

Lynn Stewart

Character Chart

Directions: After reading the assigned comic book, complete the items below based on your understanding of the character from the text. This should be completed as each group member reads the assigned copy of their Black Lightning Comic.

Character's Name:

	Comic Series Attributes	TV Series Attributes
Character's Occupation/Role in the story:		
Character's Actions		
Character's Thoughts/Emotions		

*Note to teacher: This organizer will be used for the next lesson.

Jennifer Pierce's character is an addition to the Black Lightning DC comic storyline in 1996. Anissa Pierce's character is an addition to the Black Lightning DC comic storyline in 2003.

- 1) Why might comic creators have made the decision to include these characters in Black Lightning's storyline?

- 2) What do we know about Jennifer?

- 3) What do we know about Anissa?

- 4) How does their presence align with the concept of Afrofuturism/Black Speculative Art?

- 5) In what ways do Anissa and Jennifer's characters challenge the ideas of the traditional hero? In what ways do these characters give voice to marginalized, intersectional groups?

*Note to teacher: This lesson will likely take 2 class periods unless it is taught in a longer instructional block.

Unit Final Project

Using the works that we have studied in class over the course of this unit, you will create your own work of art in one of the following areas:

- 1) Art- (drawing, painting, sculpture, collage, mosaic, textile)
- 2) Literature-(poems, short stories, vignette)
- 3) Film/Video-(short film, script/screenplay)
- 4) Music-(song with or without lyrics)

For this assignment, you must incorporate elements of that particular genre into your original work that address the essential questions for the unit. After completing your work in the speculative/science fiction genre, you will write an expository essay that analyzes how your original work of speculative art connects to the essential questions (and their answers as you understand them) for the unit.

Unit Essential Questions

- 1) **How does race/racism impact Black speculative art and its subgenres?**
- 2) **What are common elements of speculative and science fiction aesthetics?**
- 3) **How can speculative and science fiction art serve as a means of liberation for marginalized people?**

You should use your Observer-Response journal to include some of the identified elements in your work.

Questions to consider:

What message will your work of art send? What do you want your audience to understand/learn from your work

Rubric for Final Project

Category	Exceptional	Above Average	Average	Below Average
Content	<p>The piece demonstrates a superior understanding of Black speculative/science fiction art and possesses clear and cohesive elements of the genre.</p> <p>I used important details and information. I developed my ideas and made sure all of my sentences connected to the prompt.</p>	<p>The piece demonstrates an excellent understanding of Black speculative/science fiction art and possesses clear and cohesive elements of the genre.</p> <p>I used some details to support my topic but I needed to add more information and supporting details.</p>	<p>The piece demonstrates a solid understanding of Black speculative/science fiction art and possesses clear and cohesive elements of the genre.</p> <p>I need to use more details to make my writing complete.</p>	<p>The piece demonstrates a poor understanding of Black speculative/science fiction art and does not possess clear and cohesive elements of the genre.</p> <p>I did not use details or ideas to support my topic or response.</p>
Focus	<p>My writing is clear and completely answers all parts of the prompt. I did not forget or lose the main idea when I added details.</p>	<p>Sometimes my writing moved away from the main point of focus of the prompt. Sometimes my details did not relate to the prompt and made my ideas confusing.</p>	<p>My writing is not clear and I drifted away from the prompt.</p>	<p>I did not stay focused on the topic or prompt. My writing is very difficult to understand when I re-read my work or when someone else reads my work.</p>
Organization	<p>I wrote a strong introduction, body, and conclusion. I used appropriate transitions to connect my ideas.</p>	<p>I wrote an introduction. I need to strengthen all portions of my response. I need to use more transition words to make my ideas flow.</p>	<p>I did not organize my response. I was missing key components of my paragraphs. My writing seems more like an outline than complete paragraphs. I did not use transition words.</p>	<p>I had no clear introduction, body, or conclusion. I have many mixed-up ideas. I did not use transition words.</p>
Style	<p>I used descriptive words that help readers "see" my ideas. My sentences varied in length, word usage, and structure. My tone and voice are consistent.</p>	<p>Most words address the prompt. I should choose a wider variety of words. I did not use different types of sentences. Tone and voice are not always consistent</p>	<p>I used a few descriptive words. I had little sentence variety. The tone and voice are not consistent</p>	<p>I used no descriptive words. My sentences all begin with the same word or are not complete. There is no consistent tone or voice.</p>
Conventions	<p>I had few, if any, errors in spelling, grammar, and punctuation. My writing is neat and legible.</p>	<p>I made a few errors in spelling, grammar, and punctuation, but my meaning is still clear and understandable.</p>	<p>I had many mistakes in spelling, grammar, and punctuation. Sometimes my writing is hard to read.</p>	<p>My writing has so many mistakes that it is difficult to read or understand.</p>

Adapted in part from the "Student Friendly" PSSA Writing Rubric created by Methacton School District

Appendix

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.WHST.6-8.2

- Write informative/explanatory texts, including the narration of historical events, scientific procedures/ experiments, or technical processes.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.7.1

- Cite several pieces of textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.7.3

- Analyze the interactions between individuals, events, and ideas in a text (e.g., how ideas influence individuals or events, or how individuals influence ideas or events).

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.7.6

- Determine an author's point of view or purpose in a text and analyze how the author distinguishes his or her position from that of others.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.7.7

- Compare and contrast a text to an audio, video, or multimedia version of the text, analyzing each medium's portrayal of the subject (e.g., how the delivery of a speech affects the impact of the words).

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.7.9

- Analyze how two or more authors writing about the same topic shape their presentations of key information by emphasizing different evidence or advancing different interpretations of facts.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.7.1

- Engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grade 7 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.7.2

- Analyze the main ideas and supporting details presented in diverse media and formats (e.g., visually, quantitatively, orally) and explain how the ideas clarify a topic, text, or issue under study.

Works Cited

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