



Article

Black Brilliance, Untethered: (Re)viewing *See You Yesterday*

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Abstract

In the 2019 film, See You Yesterday, two brilliant, Black teenage prodigies, C.J. Walker and Sebastian Thomas, build an innovative invention: a backpack that enables time travel. When C.J.'s older brother is wrongfully killed by police, they use their unfinished project to save him. Despite multiple attempts, they learn the disheartening lesson of the perpetuity of anti-Blackness. However, (re)viewing the film as a critical dystopia opens up necessary conversations for schools on how to untether Black brilliance from the yolk of anti-Blackness to help students wholly reimagine their material and future worlds.

Keywords

Critical Dystopia, Afrofuturism, Black Brilliance, Black Youth, Anti-Blackness

Introduction

See You Yesterday is a 2019 film directed by Stefon Bristol that centers on Claudette Josephine (C.J.) Walker, a tenacious, brilliant Black girl, and her best friend, Sebastian Thomas, an equally talented Black boy, as they attempt to secure their future in multiple ways. In hopes of entering the most prestigious colleges, they create an innovative invention, a backpack that enables time travel. In the opening scene, their teacher, Mr. Lockhart--played by Michael J. Fox, best known as Marty McFly in the *Back to the Future* (1985) trilogy--is reading *Kindred* by award-winning science fiction writer, Octavia Butler. In Butler's great work, an African American woman travels back in time to pre-Civil War America and has to contend with the dehumanization, injustice, and oppression of chattel slavery. Foreshadowing the film's storyline, Mr. Lockhart queries the teenagers, "If time travel were possible, it would be the greatest ethical and philosophical conundrum of the modern age. If you had that kind of power, what would you do? What would you change?"

C.J. and Sebastian diligently work on their device in hopes of achieving typical teenage dreams: winning an award at a prestigious science expo; obtaining college scholarships; and becoming famous. After succeeding in their first attempt at temporal relocation, however, these teenage dreams are halted when C.J.'s brother, Calvin, is shot by police in a case of mistaken identity. After bearing witness to the aftermath of her brother's murder, C.J. utilizes their unfinished science project to change the course of history. Yet, as she repeatedly returns to the past, she learns the disheartening lesson of the imminence of Black death (Sharpe, 2016). Attempting to rupture the equation between blackness and death, C.J. convinces a reluctant Sebastian, who fears the widespread consequences and ethical implications of changing the past, to travel back in time and save Calvin's life. The first time they travel back in time, their efforts to stop Calvin's murder are unsuccessful. The second time they return, C.J. successfully saves her brother but, regrettably, Sebastian is killed. On the third attempt, C.J. travels back in time alone to prevent Sebastian's death. While Sebastian is spared, unfortunately, she still loses her brother. Sebastian pleads with C.J. to accept her brother's death and no longer risk their lives by altering the course of fate. Though the previous attempts at changing the past seem to show C.J. that there is no circumstance or timescape that guarantees the safety, livelihood, or lives of Black people, the film ends with C.J.'s relentless pursuit, returning back in time once again to secure the futures of both her brother and best friend.

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See You Yesterday underscores a commitment to Black humanity but becomes a broader metaphor for the perpetuity of anti-Blackness (Patterson, 1982; Sharpe, 2016; Wilderson, 2010). Consequently, it is difficult not to fall prey to hopelessness or take a pessimistic stance when Black characters are seemingly always tethered to dehumanization, suffering, and death – even within the spaces of our imaginations. Purposefully, this film refuses a romantic or utopian ending; instead, it “lingers in the terrors of the present even as they exemplify what is needed to transform it” (Moylan, 2000, p. 198-199). While popularly categorized as science fiction, this film is an important example of critical dystopian film.

As a genre, critical dystopia provides visions of undesirable futures in order to inspire and promote change, “emphasizing that there are alternatives to the dystopian conditions being portrayed” (Booker, 2013, p. 5). (Re)viewing the film--or seeing it again, with more critical eyes--as a critical dystopia provides a powerful analytic framework to engage in discourse about the realities of anti-Blackness as endemic in schools and society. It simultaneously allows us to imagine new worlds. On the other hand, rather than allowing the permanence of anti-Blackness to remain central in our futurist imaginings, Quashie (2021) invites us to begin somewhere else. Quashie conceptualizes Black aliveness as an aesthetic imaginary founded on Black worldness that does not exist in the shadow of anti-Black violence. He invites the reader to radically imagine a Black world beyond the denial and demand of Black humanity. In this review, I invite you to imagine such a world.

C.J. and Sebastian, like many Black youth across the nation, are forced to cope with the histories, present traumas, and ubiquity of anti-Blackness, inside and outside of schools (Dumas, 2014). These material realities mean that they are often not allowed to just *be* Black kids, but their brilliance, beings and becomings must *always* be acts of resistance. (Re)viewing the film with implications for schools, I ask you to consider the following questions:

- What possibilities lie at the heart of Black brilliance when not tethered to anti-Blackness? How would the film change?
- What is the utility of critical dystopia as a literary genre, and as an analytic framework?
- How does an understanding of anti-Blackness in society, and in schools more specifically, help us engage in practices that center Black humanity?
- How might integrating art, science, math, history, technology, and Afro-diasporic cultures in schools create space for technologies of freedom? How might schools take such an interdisciplinary approach?
- How can these technologies help actualize worlds that sustain Black joy, Black being, and Black aliveness, inside and outside of school?
- What conditions are possible when U.S. educational systems untether from anti-Blackness? Is such an untethering even possible?

Thomas (2019) suggests that emancipating our imaginations, fantasies, and dreams offers us the ability to reinterpret the weather, or totality of anti-Blackness (Sharpe, 2016). Indeed, untethering Black brilliance from the yolk of anti-Blackness helps students wholly reimagine their material and future worlds. However, schools must be committed to dismantling all forms of anti-Blackness, those laden in our imaginings, as well as in the practices, policies, and pedagogies within the U.S. educational structure. Through the lens of critical dystopia, *See You Yesterday* illustrates how the imminence of Black death and the permanence of anti-Blackness limits possibilities for Black youth. It challenges us to consider how technologies can be used to resist anti-Blackness, but simultaneously, forces us to reimagine a Black world where Black aliveness is the shadow. The film refuses the comfort of a happy ending. In doing so, it creates space to conjure radical dreams of freedom and liberatory educational futures.

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