

AFROFUTURISM

THE WORLD OF BLACK SCI-FI AND FANTASY CULTURE

YTASHA L. WOMACK

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I dedicate this book to Dr. Johnnie Coleman, the first Afrofuturist to inspire my journey. I dedicate
~~this book to the legions of thinkers and futurists who envision a loving world.~~

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INTRODUCTION

Who are you?" the Cheshire cat asked Alice in the mindbending *Alice in Wonderland*. As a kid, I found the scary disappearing kooky kitten and his prickly questions nightmarish. When I got to the page where those glow-in-the-dark eyes in my Disney-friendly children's version storybook appeared, I'd flip the page faster than Gabby Douglas on the balance beam. Frightening, albeit intriguing. When Morpheus gives Neo the red pill/blue pill option, prefacing that I will find out just how deep the rabbit hole goes, *The Matrix* viewers know this is another tornado ride. Oz. No, Dorothy, you're not in Kansas anymore. And for those who adopt the Afrofuturist paradigm, the ideas can take you light-years away from the place you call home, only to return knowing you had everything you needed from the start.

Readers, our future is now. Fortunately, there are guideposts on this worded journey through the cosmos, key archetypes that anchor the imagination on this spaceship ride dubbed "freedom": the Dogon's Sirius star, the fabled mermaid, the sky ark, a DJ scratch that blares like a Miles Davis horn, an ankh, a Yoruba deity, an Egyptian god, a body of water, a dancing robot, an Outkast ATLien. And there's electricity, lots of electricity, nanotechnology, and plants. Someone may shout, "Wake up!" Others will echo chants of hope. Maybe you'll hop into a parallel universe with a past that reads like a fantasy or a future that feels like the past. But no trek is complete until you spot a sundial-sized headdress or the psychedelic wig. We like really big hair or no hair at all. Call it the power of the subconscious or the predominance of soul culture gone cyberpop, but this dance through time travel that Afrofuturists live for is as much about soul retrieval as it is about jettisoning into the far-off future, the uncharted Mill Way, or the depths of the subconscious and imagination.

Sun Ra, George Clinton, and Octavia Butler are sides of that Giza-like pyramid you find. Although the controls on the spaceship match your video game console, your life is not a video game. You are in cyberspace. Satellite maps don't work here. You cannot "check in," although you can click "like." No hyperlinks. If lost, get down to get up, go up to get down. If you must communicate, invent a communication device with a social media platform, and you'll be heard. Take photos, lots and lots of photos. Like every good hero, you have a digital soundtrack. But most important, you have nice reading material to smooth the ride. Oh, and you'll need sunglasses, really cool sunglasses.

Stay Spacetastic
Ytas

EVOLUTION OF A SPACE CADET



When I was in the fourth grade, I was Princess Leia for Halloween. Leia, the princess and co-leader of the rebel forces in *Star Wars Episode IV: A New Hope*, was my heroine at elementary school. It is a distinct memory, because wearing all white with a wooden sword on your hip in a rainstorm and trying to explain that you're a cosmic princess to candy-giving neighbors isn't a memory you forget. With two giant braids twisted into coils and pinned neatly on either side of my head, I found the idea of being a galactic princess with guts and brains to be pretty cool. Later, I would fully understand the myth of the Force and the archetypal battles between ego and light that render *Star Wars* fans so enthusiastic. But as a kid, I was a bit more infatuated with lightsabers and Ewoks and just glad that Luke and Leia didn't fall in love, because they were Jedi siblings.

While it was fun to be the chick from outer space in my imagination, the quest to see myself as a browner person in this space age, galactic epic was important to me. Through the eyes of a child, the absence of such imagery didn't escape me. For one, I secretly wished that Lando Calrissian, played by the symbol Billy Dee Williams, hadn't lost the *Millennium Falcon* in a bet—then maybe he, and not Han Solo, would have had more screen time navigating the solar systems. I wished that when Darth Vader's face was revealed, it would have been actor James Earl Jones, the real-life voice behind the mask, and not the British thespian David Prowse who emerged. Then again, I also wished that Princess Leia and not Luke had been the first sibling trained in the way of the Jedi, and then I could have carried a lightsaber on Halloween instead of my brother's wooden sword.

While it would be easy to dismiss these wishes as childhood folly from yesteryear, it's in wishes like these—all a result of the obvious absence of people of color in the fictitious future/past (remember, it was a long time ago in a galaxy far, far away)—that seeds were planted in the imaginations of countless black kids who yearned to see themselves in warp-speed spaceships too. With the diversity of the nation and the world increasingly standing in stark contrast to the diversity in futuristic works, it's no surprise that Afrofuturism emerged.

No surprise either that with Princess Leia a few solar returns behind me, I would create *Rayla 2211*, a multimedia series with music, books, animation, and games that follows Rayla Illmatic. Rayla is a rebel strategist and third-generation citizen of Planet Hope, an Earth colony gone rogue some two hundred years into the future. Her nickname is Princess, and she's charged with finding Moulan Shakur (note the Disney and Tupac shout-outs), a mysterious scientist who trains her to find the Missing. The journey takes her across worlds and lifetimes. And she's a browner woman. She's balancing her go-hard attitude with a penchant for love, she quotes twentieth- and twenty-first-century pop culture song lyrics like they're Shakespeare, and she wields a nice, shiny double-edged sword.

Friends and colleagues have joked that the 3-D animated image of Rayla reminds them of me.

No kidding.

Black to the Future

I was an Afrofuturist before the term existed. And any sci-fi fan, comic book geek, fantasy reader, Trekker, or science fair winner who ever wondered why black people are minimized in pop culture depictions of the future, conspicuously absent from the history of science, or marginalized in the roster of past inventors and then actually set out to do something about it could arguably qualify as an Afrofuturist as well.

It's one thing when black people aren't discussed in world history. Fortunately, teams of dedicated

historians and culture advocates have chipped away at the propaganda often functioning as history for the world's students to eradicate that glaring error. But when, even in the imaginary future—a space where the mind can stretch beyond the Milky Way to envision routine space travel, cuddly space animals, talking apes, and time machines—people can't fathom a person of non-Euro descent a hundred years into the future, a cosmic foot has to be put down.

It was an age-old joke that blacks in sci-fi movies from the '50s through the '90s typically had a do-or-die fate. The black man who saved the day in the original *Night of the Living Dead* was killed by trigger-happy cops. The black man who landed with Charlton Heston in the original *Planet of the Apes* was quickly captured and stuffed in a museum. An overeager black scientist nearly triggered the end of the world in *Terminator 2*. On occasion, the black character in such films popped up as the silent, mystical type or maybe a scary witch doctor, but it was fairly clear that in the artistic renderings of the future based on pop culture standards, people of color weren't factors at all.

But then came the smash box-office success of *The Matrix* and *Avatar*. Both movies spoke to a reenvisioning of the future that weaved mysticism, explored the limits of technology, and advocated for self-expression and peace. *The Matrix* included a cast of multiethnic characters, the polar opposite of the legacy of homogeneous sci-fi depictions so great that even film critic Roger Ebert questioned whether *The Matrix* creators envisioned a future world dominated by black people. Then Denzel Washington played humanity's savior in the Hughes brothers' postapocalyptic film *The Book of Eli*. Wesley Snipes's heroic *Blade* trilogy inspired a new tier of black vampire heroes, not to mention a cosplay craze in which countless men donned the Blade costume.

Will Smith, summer blockbuster king and the consummate smart-talking good guy, was the sci-fi hero ushering in the new millennium. As an actor, he has saved Earth and greater humanity three times and counting, not including the time he outsmarted surveillance technology in *Enemy of the State*. Smith put a cosmic dent in the monolithic depiction of the sci-fi hero. He played a devoted scientist and lone man on Earth working on a cure to save humanity from the zombie apocalypse in *I Am Legend*; he was the kick-butt war pilot who landed a mean hook on an alien and could fly galactic spacecraft, thus disabling the impending alien invasion in *Independence Day*; and he played a sunglasses-clad government agent devoted to keeping humans ignorant of the massive alien populations both friendly and hostile who frequent Earth in the *Men in Black* trilogy. In *After Earth*, Smith plays the father of a character played by his real-life son, Jaden Smith, on a distant planet some thousand years after Earth has been evacuated. Both men on a ride through space find themselves stranded on a very different Earth and the save-the-earth lineage continues. These cultural hallmarks aside, a larger culture of black sci-fi heads have now taken it upon themselves to create their own takes on futuristic life through the arts and critical theory. And the creations are groundbreaking.

What Is Afrofuturism?

Afrofuturism is an intersection of imagination, technology, the future, and liberation. "I generally define Afrofuturism as a way of imagining possible futures through a black cultural lens," says Ingrid LaFleur, an art curator and Afrofuturist. LaFleur presented for the independently organized TEDx Fort Greene Salon in Brooklyn, New York. "I see Afrofuturism as a way to encourage experimentation, reimagining identities, and activate liberation," she said.¹

Whether through literature, visual arts, music, or grassroots organizing, Afrofuturists redefine culture and notions of blackness for today and the future. Both an artistic aesthetic and a framework for

critical theory, Afrofuturism combines elements of science fiction, historical fiction, speculative fiction, fantasy, Afrocentricity, and magic realism with non-Western beliefs. In some cases, it's a total reenvisioning of the past and speculation about the future rife with cultural critiques.

Take William Hayashi's self-published novel *Discovery: Volume 1 of the Darkside Trilogy*. The story follows the discovery of rumored black American separatists whose disgust with racial disparity led them to create a society on the moon long before Neil Armstrong's arrival. The story is a commentary on separatist theory, race, and politics that inverts the nationalistic themes of the early space race.

Or take John Jennings and Stacey Robinson's *Black Kirby* exhibit, a touring tribute to legend Jack Kirby of Marvel and DC Comics fame. The show is a "What if Jack Kirby were black?" speculation depicting Kirby's iconic comic book covers using themes from black culture. The show displays parallels between black culture and Kirby's Jewish heritage, explores otherness and alienation, and adds new dimensions to the pop culture hero.

Afrofuturism can weave mysticism with its social commentary too. Award-winning fiction writer Nnedi Okorafor's *Who Fears Death* captures the struggles of Onyesonwu, a woman in post-nuclear apocalyptic Africa who is under the tutelage of a shaman. She hopes to use her newfound gifts to save her people from genocide.

Whether it's the African futuristic fashion of former Diddy-Dirty Money songstress Dawn Richard—which she unveiled in her music videos for the digital album *Goldenheart*—or the indie film and video game *Project Fly*, which was created by DJ James Quake and follows a group of black ninjas on Chicago's South Side, the creativity born from rooting black culture in sci-fi and fantasy is an exciting evolution.

This blossoming culture is unique. Unlike previous eras, today's artists can wield the power of digital media, social platforms, digital video, graphic arts, gaming technology, and more to tell their stories, share their stories, and connect with audiences inexpensively—a gift from the sci-fi gods, so to speak, that was unthinkable at the turn of the century. The storytelling gatekeepers vanished with the high-speed modem, and for the first time in history, people of color have a greater ability to project their own stories. This tug-and-pull debate over black people controlling their image shifts considerably when a fledgling filmmaker can shoot his sci-fi web series on a \$500 DV cam, post it on YouTube, and promote it on Instagram and Twitter.

While technology empowers creators, this intrigue with sci-fi and fantasy itself inverts conventional thinking about black identity and holds the imagination supreme. Black identity does not have to be a negotiation with awful stereotypes, a dystopian view of the race (remember those black-man-as-endangered-species stories or the constant "Why are black women single?" reports?), an abysmal sense of powerlessness, or a reckoning of hardened realities. Fatalism is not a synonym for blackness.

If a story line or an artist's disposition wasn't washed in fatalism, southern edicts, or urbanized reality, then some questioned whether it was even "black." Sci-fi vanguard and writer Octavia Butler, who authored the famous *Parable* series and laid the groundwork for countless sci-fi heroines and writers to follow, said it never failed that she'd be confronted by someone at a conference who would ask, "Just what does science fiction have to do with black people?"

Rise of the Black Geek

More than just a hipster fashion statement where big glasses, tight suits, and high-water pants are the norm, the black geek phenomenon normalizes all things formally couched as geeky. Science lovers, spa

dreamers, comic book fans, techies, or anyone who relishes super-high-level analysis just for the fun of it could be a geek, according to conventional wisdom. Today, such interests are cool, functional, and often necessary—or at least there's a larger world where those of like minds can find one another online and aren't limited to hanging out with, say, the one other kid on the block who likes quantum physics. A decade or two ago, many kids had to hide their love affairs in a swathe of coolness, athleticism, and popularity or face being isolated and teased to no end. Documentarian Tony Williams's latest project, *Carbonerdious: Rise of the Black Nerd*, chronicles this shift in geekness. A self-described techie and musician and comic lover, he admits to being a geek and has scoured the country interviewing black geeks from all walks of life. In fact, the finesse of geekdom was celebrated at the University of Illinois's 2013 Black Geek Week, a week of panels featuring scientists, animators, comic book illustrators, science fiction writers, and technology experts, most of whom grew up in families that encouraged a strong cultural identity and natural curiosity that rooted them in ways that made the panelists comfortable being left of center. I participated as well, and I was struck by the sense of duty accompanying the panelists. Today, the closeted and not-so-closeted geeks embraced this once-feared word like a badge of honor, the ultimate reward for their persistence, intelligence, wit, and the pure hell they often withstood when sharing their geekdom with unappreciative peers. Today, those geeks are on the upswing, working in the tech industry, owning comic book stores, illustrating as animators, or studying in labs across the country. All those lonely hours of work, those hellacious awkward years, and the moments of isolation have paid off.

In fact, when I shared in passing with a few people, fresh off the conference trail, that I attended a black geek affair, the listeners confided that they, despite their suits or swag, were really geeks, too. But this bonding moment had happened before. The notion surfaced at author Baratunde Thurston's *How to Be Black* book release party, where after hearing several satirical but true tales, people confided about their geek past to one another. Stories were shared at a Vocalo.org storytelling hour, where participants shared tales of growing comfortable with their inner geek. People all over the country were revealing their giant Gs on their chests: part confession, part pride, all with a longing to have honor restored. Had the inner geek become a bonding mechanism? Although the black geek isn't new to America's shores—black America has a history of black geeks and intellectuals, although being a geek and an intellectual isn't always the same thing—the celebration totally shatters limited notions of black identity. Mia Coleman, a die-hard science fiction fan who travels the country to attend sci-fi conventions, sometimes applying for support from the Carl Brandon Society, an organization designed to encourage diversity in sci-fi, says that the genre is the perfect space for those who don't fit in. "I love science fiction; it can save people's lives. If you feel weird, there's a big place that will embrace you. Instead of feeling weird and isolated, it brings people together."

Cosplay Rules

The same goes for cosplay. Cosplay, or the act of donning costumes from your favorite comic book, video game, manga, or anime tale, is pretty popular, totally geeky, and truly fun. There's a large number of black participants in the cosplay community, each dressed as his or her favorite hero or heroine at the ComicCons and other cosplay parties across the country. From Storm to Blade, Batman to Supergirl, Green Lantern to Black Panther, black cosplay fans adopt the mannerisms, costumes, and makeup of them all. At the last ComicCon I attended, I spotted a man dressed as Django, the vigilante former slave in the film *Django Unchained*. A friend of mine spotted a father-daughter Martian team.

This open play with the imagination, one that isn't limited to Halloween or film, is a break from

identity, one that mirrors the dress-up antics associated with George Clinton, Grace Jones, and other eccentric luminaries now dubbed Afrofuturists. While it's all play, there's a power in breaking past rigid identity parameters and adopting the persona of one's favorite hero.

"Cosplay is a form of empowerment for all children and adults," says Stanford Carpenter, president and cofounder of the Institute for Comics Studies, who says that he used to be dismissive of cosplay. But after attending dozens of ComicCons, he witnessed the dress-up affair changing masked heroes indefinitely. "It's about empowerment. It's about the possibility of what you can be or what you can do. And when you see people in underrepresented groups, it takes on the empowerment fantasy of not just, say, being Superman, but also the dimension of stepping on the much more narrow roles that we are assigned. But this idea of this superhero has an added dimension because it inherently pushes against many of the stereotypes that are thrust upon us. It is this opportunity to push the boundaries of what you can be and in so doing, you're imagining a whole new world and possibilities for yourself that can extend beyond the cosplay experience," says Carpenter. "It's like stepping to the top of the mountain top, where everything looks small. It's not that you stay on the mountain top forever, but when you come down you're not the same. You have a new perspective. A choice that you don't know is a choice that you don't have. The imagination is the greatest resource that humans have. Cosplay builds on that. Cosplay puts imagination and desire into action in a way that allows people to look at things differently."

What do black geek conferences, geek confessions, space warrior princesses, and excitable black fans dressed like Green Lantern and Blade have to do with progress? Everything.

Afrofuturism unchains the mind. This charge to spur critical thinking is why museums including the Tubman African-American Museum in Macon, Georgia, the Sargent Johnson Gallery in Oakland, and the Museum of Contemporary Diasporan Arts in Brooklyn championed Afrofuturism exhibits, hoping to engage children and nontraditional art communities.

"It gives our young people another out," says Melorra Green, visual arts coordinator of the Sargent Johnson Gallery in Oakland. "They need to see people stepping outside of the norm."

I remember a twenty-something African American woman who took my screenwriting class once. She was incredibly frustrated because she wanted to write a historical fiction narrative with black characters but felt thwarted by the realities of racism in the past. There could be no cowboy hero, no Victorian romance, no antebellum South epic, or any other story without the cloud of slavery and colonialism to doom her character's fate. She couldn't come up with a single story idea that could have a happy ending, at least not one that took place in the past five hundred years, up to, say, 1960. As for writing sci-fi or creating a world in the future or coming up with a complete fantasy, she didn't know how she could integrate black culture into the story. The parameters of race had completely chained her imagination.

One movement that counteracts historical assumptions is the steampunk movement, which has a large black subculture. In fact, the books and illustrations emerging from the culture are deemed steamfunk. Steampunk is a sci-fi subgenre that uses steam-powered technology from the eras of the Old West and Victorian age as the backdrop for alternative-history sagas. The stories are as lively as the real world steampunk fashionistas, a legion of nineteenth-century-fixated, corset-wearing petticoat lovers who modernize the top hat and pocket watch for the current era.

At its heart, Afrofuturism stretches the imagination far beyond the conventions of our time and the horizons of expectation, and kicks the box of normalcy and preconceived ideas of blackness out of the solar system. Whether it's sci-fi story lines or radical eccentricity, Afrofuturism inverts reality.

Afrofuturists write their own stories.

“Afrofuturism, like post blackness, destabilizes previous analysis of blackness,” says Reynald Anderson, assistant professor of humanities at Harris-Stowe State University and a writer of Afrofuturist critical theory. “What I like about Afrofuturism is it helps create our own space in the future; it allows us to control our imagination,” he says. “An Afrofuturist is not ignorant of history, but they don’t let history restrain their creative impulses either.”

The Dawn of a New Era

Afrofuturism as a term was coined by cultural critic Mark Dery, who used it in his 1994 essay “Black to the Future” to describe a flurry of analysis fueled by sci-fi-loving black college students and artists who were passionately reframing discussions about art and social change through the lens of science and technology in the 1980s and ’90s. Dery ushered in the serious study of cyberculture and gave a name to the technoculture trends in black America. Music and culture writers Greg Tate, Mark Singer, and Kodwo Eshun were among the earliest Afrofuturism theorists, paralleling Dery’s interest. The roots of the aesthetic began decades before, but with the emergence of Afrofuturism as a philosophical study, suddenly artists like avant-garde jazz legend Sun Ra, funk pioneer George Clinton, and sci-fi author Octavia Butler were rediscovered and reframed by Afrofuturists as social change agents.

The role of science and technology in the black experience overall was unearthed and viewed from new perspectives. Black musical innovators were being studied for their use and creation of progressive technologies. Inventors like Joseph Hunter Dickinson, who made innovations to the player piano and record player, were viewed as champions in black musical production. Jimi Hendrix’s use of reverb on his guitar was reframed as a part of a black musical and scientific legacy. Others explored the historical social impact of technological advances on people of African descent and how they were wielded to affirm racial divisions or to overcome them.

And many found the parallels between sci-fi themes of alien abduction and the transatlantic slave trade to be both haunting and fascinating. Were stories about aliens really just metaphors for the experience of blacks in the Americas?

Afrofuturists sought to unearth the missing history of people of African descent and their roles in science, technology, and science fiction. They also aimed to reintegrate people of color into the discussion of cyberculture, modern science, technology, and sci-fi pop culture. With the Internet in its infancy, they hoped to facilitate equal access to progressive technologies, knowing that a widespread embrace would diminish the race-based power imbalance—and hopefully color-based limitations—for good.

A Cyber Movement Is Born

Graduate student Alondra Nelson was living in New York City in the late 1990s when she launched an AOL Listserv, an early Internet discussion pool, for students and artists who wanted to explore ideas about technology, space, freedom, culture, and art with science fiction as the centrifuge. Nelson was a sci-fi fan and saw parallels between popular themes in science fiction and themes in the history and culture of people of African descent in the Americas. She especially resonated with the theme of cultural abduction and with the unsung black scientists who were often missing from history books.

“The first moderator was DJ Spooky,” Nelson says, referring to the DJ well known for remixing the film *The Birth of a Nation* live in a touring set. Others, including award-winning sci-fi author Nalo Hopkinson and theorist Alexander Weheliye, signed on too. “It became a rich site for sharing,” Nelson

says. The site became a Yahoo! group, and then a Google group, and eventually someone put up a website. By 2000, Nelson was writing on Afrofuturism for *Colorlines*. “I wrote about the community and what we were trying to do,” she says.

Discussions of art, human rights, or cultural hallmarks among people of African descent in this vein were new and exciting. There existed a host of writings and creations that were a bit left of the cultural paradigm and hadn’t previously fit neatly into any existing arts movements, and this new space-tinged prism gave them a context.

As more long-lost works were uncovered and discussed in this new framework, it became clear that there was a tradition of sci-fi or futuristic works created by people of African descent that stretched back to precolonial Africa. More recently, being imaginative and creative, and even projecting black culture into the future, was part of a lineage of resistance to daunting power structures. The conversation around these subjects led others to create new works and find old ones, and an enthusiasm to document the movement ensued. Suddenly the world of black sci-fi geeks and comic book fans who felt isolated and their interests and ignored by mainstream sci-fi creators had a virtual home, an aesthetic to give their craft and pastime an academically based validity.

The idea of Afrofuturism was groundbreaking, as was the use of the blossoming Internet space that facilitated the conversation. “It would have been much more difficult to have the conversation ten years earlier,” says Alexander Weheliye, now a professor who teaches Afrofuturism and postintegration perspectives at Northwestern University.

Many of the leading Afrofuturism professors and artists were participants on the Listserv. “Being on the Listserv provided a space for our ideas,” Weheliye says. Nelson pushed the conversation on Afrofuturism beyond artistic analysis to the point of creating change for the future.

The name Afrofuturism itself toiled largely in academic and arts circles, specifically those circles that were engaged in the conversation. Even today many people creating Afrofuturistic work are newcomers to the term. But the idea of creating more works with people of color in sci-fi and exploring the idea of blacks in the future is spreading like wildfire.

The Internet continues to be the primary gathering site for Afrofuturists. In 2008 Jarvis Sheffield created BlackScience Fiction.com, a website for sci-fi artists, writers, filmmakers, and animators. Riding high off the election of President Barack Obama, Sheffield, a comic book fan and a father, wanted to create a site with diverse images for his son. The site launched with ten profiles. In 2012 it had 2,011. “I’m addicted to the site. Every week someone posts something new,” says Sheffield. He assembled works from featured writers on the website and released *Genesis: An Anthology of Black Science Fiction* in two volumes. Today, the site is a major portal for sci-fi creators.

The Mothership Lands on a Historically Black College and University (HBCU)

My introduction to what I would later learn was Afrofuturism began in college. I didn’t know Nelson. I didn’t know Dery. But I did know crews of campus students in the Clark Atlanta, More-houses, Spelman, and Morris Brown quads who would gather between and after classes to converse. They were honor bound to the links between black history and science fiction, and rooted in the belief that more art and critical theory on the subject could spawn social change.

Since these college crews were on an upwardly mobile path to enlightenment just years shy of the

dawn of the twenty-first century, you could find yourself debating everything from the metaphors in the latest underground hip-hop release to the validity of the Book of Genesis. It was nothing formal, maybe a meeting of two minds, nothing more. But the logic in the cyclical equations this cadre of urban philosophers shared zigzagged from quantum physics to African philosophy to film aesthetics to economic theories to music theory and back. The reasoning always put people of color square at the heart of the theorem. The plight of black people collectively lined the hypothesis, formulated the body and the conclusion, and somehow always tied into a future and past as intricately woven as strands of DNA.

Kamafi, a Philly-born honors history and physics major, launched an underground newspaper on the subject that posted essays and art from fellow students. Outspoken, smart as a whip, and proud, he embodied the hip-hop aesthetic like a warrior's cloak and was a self-proclaimed "Du Boisian" who got kicked out of destroying people's ivory towers with earth-rooted knowledge. I like to think I was one of the few who weren't thrown for a loop with his mojo bag of theories, but he did throw at least one at me that had me dazzled: his breakdown on Parliament/ Funkadelic.

At the time, I didn't see the depth of "One Nation Under a Groove" or "Freak of the Week" beyond their mesmerizing bass lines. He proceeded to explain the Parliament/Funkadelic cosmology—a winding galactic tale in which funk doubled as the Force à la *Star Wars* in a space-age tale that pitted wrongdoers against light-seekers, all told in a series of albums. He echoed the double entendres in his work, the multiple layers in various lyrics. And just when I was about to argue that he was making the whole thing up, I realized that he was on to something.

Because the aesthetic in the music was popping up in hip-hop and neo-soul lyrics. Songstress Erykah Badu, who minored in physics while attending Grambling University, another HBCU, made casual references to the P-Funk mothership and quantum physics. As a newfound resident Atlantan, I was under the spell of Outkast's second album, deftly titled *ATLiens*. Between the streams of college kids who wanted to debate *Star Wars* and the unearthing of P-Funk in '90s-era hip-hop, the brewing of a new aesthetic was obvious. A budding culture of artists and sci-fi fans was using art and media platforms to explore humanity and the experiences of people in the African diaspora in futuristic works.

Over the years, I became fascinated by the growing number of artists I encountered who were developing art exploring people of color and the future. Visual artists, graphic artists, musicians, poets, DJs, dancers, writers, and filmmakers—each immersed in works with strong sci-fi and historical fiction themes, often flirting with an Eastern or African philosophy, and all utilizing black characters and aesthetics to deconstruct images of the past to re-visualize the future.

I went to the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago to see DJ Spooky's revisualization of the film *The Birth of a Nation*, with live DJ scratches and break beats underscoring a reedited, rhythmic version of the characters in blackface. I met artists like Nicole Mitchell, a jazz flutist and composer who wrote a composition in honor of Octavia Butler, and Chris Adams and Jonathan Woods, video directors who incorporated sci-fi images and themes in their work. Increasingly, I found myself meeting artists who were digging to create a digital future with a pensive urgency only matched by a growing culture of African Americans flipping through films and comic books, music and novels, seeking those very same creations.

It was all food for thought in a growing mental list for my own private study. Clearly this line of research was uncategorizable—some good-natured pop psychology that bound fiction and fantasy with historical elements thrown in to lend weight to long-winding debates. Then one day I was in Chicago at an art show at the G. R. N'Namdi Gallery. The gallery was bubbling with springtime collectors and

artists, elated that the weather was finally warming, when I met a woman whose offhand comment piqued my curiosity. D. Denenge Akpem, an artist and professor I'd met once before, mentioned that she was teaching a new class at Columbia College in Chicago. "I'm teaching Afrofuturism," she remarked. Immediately my mind warp-spaced to my college years and the cult of analysis among classmates who discussed cultural phenomena. While I'd never heard the term Afrofuturism before, I knew exactly what she was talking about. "You mean, they're teaching this in schools now?" I asked. Her response was "Well, yes."

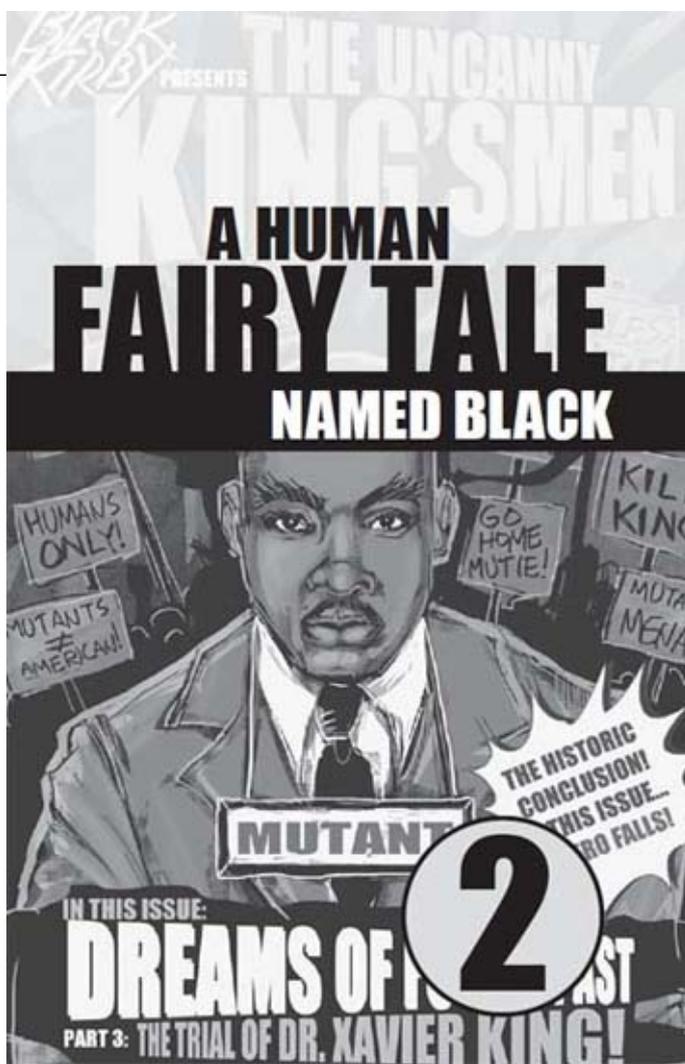
After the shock wore off, I figured, Why wouldn't they?

There's a burgeoning group of professors, much like the famed hip-hop professors who emerged a decade ago, who are dedicated to the study of works that analyze dynamics of race and culture specific to the experiences of black people through sci-fi and fantasy works. They use it as a platform to assess humanity issues—including war, apartheid, and genocide—while also exploring class issues, spirituality, philosophy, and history. Others reevaluate the use of technology, its use in society, and its role in the creation of art as a process. Still others look to these analyses as methodologies to free people from mental blocks and societal limitations. But each, from the artist to the professor to the fan, prioritizes the reenvisioning of people of color in a shared harmonious future free of race-based power issues. At the very least, they create a future with people of color integrally involved—a demonstration that counteracts pop culture's relative failure to do so.

It's fitting that this book is being published after the reelection of the nation's first African American president. A dream held dear by the futurists of the past, not so long ago the rise of the president would have been in the realms of science fiction. Today, the future is now. The first human voice broadcast from Mars was that of NASA director Charles F. Bolden, a Houston-born retired marine and former astronaut who is also African American. The president has charged NASA to land on an asteroid by 2025, and private enterprise Mars One is taking applications for Earthlings to launch a Mars colony by 2023. We are at the dawn of the commercial space era. The intersection of imagination, technology, culture, and innovation is pivotal. The synergy of the four creates an informed prism that can redefine lifestyles, worldviews, and beliefs. Afrofuturism is often the umbrella for an amalgamation of narratives, but at the core, it values the power of creativity and imagination to reinvigorate culture and transcend social limitations. The resilience of the human spirit lies in our ability to imagine.

The imagination is a tool of resistance. Creating stories with people of color in the future defies the norm. With the power of technology and emerging freedoms, black artists have more control over the image than ever before.

Welcome to the future.



When I was in college, I remember my African American History teacher posing a question that would forever change our lives. “Which came first,” she asked, “racism or slavery?” My classmates, all of whom considered themselves to be quasi black history experts, were firm in their answer: racism. We believed that those who led the transatlantic slave trade and infused laws to support it had an intrinsic belief that people of darker skin were inferior and thus they enslaved them. But we were wrong. Slavery, she said, came first, and racism was created to justify it. We argued with her, because for us, it simply didn’t make any sense. Race, we believed, always existed. But race, we soon realized, despite our pride, was a creation too.

Soon after I wrote *Post Black*, race as a political creation that we’d all come to live with as this fixed division became so obvious that I began including it in my book chats as part of my official stump speech. When I met artist and filmmaker Cauleen Smith in July 2011, she best summed up race as a creation: “Blackness is a technology,” said Smith. “It’s not real. It’s a thing.”

Dorothy Roberts, Northwestern University professor and medical-ethics advocate, calls race “the fatal invention.” She writes extensively about medical and health experts falsely using race and DNA to make medical determinations.

“I decided to write [the book *Fatal Invention*] because I have noticed resurgence in the use of the term race as a biological category. And also [I noticed] a growing acceptance among colleagues and speakers that race really is biological and somehow genomic science will soon discover the biological truths about race,” says Roberts. “The more I looked into it, I saw there were more scientists that said they discovered race in the genes, and more products coming out showing that race is a natural division.”¹

Race as a biological entity has seeped into conventional wisdom with both blacks and whites at various times, using the invention to explain power imbalances and superiority. Even Nation of Islam founder Elijah Muhammad taught that the white race was invented by an evil scientist. Others, in an attempt to counter racism, developed an odd science claiming that melanin gave brown people better intuitive or superhuman abilities.

Frankly, as much as people analyze race in the public discourse, it’s rarely discussed as an invention to regulate social order. Even those who advocate against injustice rarely broach race as a creation. The argument could have the same consequences as that of post-racialists, who say that racial divisions no longer exist. How does one discuss the realities of the pain and social maladies caused by lack of equity and at the same time say that race is a creation? Are the injustices imagined too? When Roberts was a guest, and I a guest cohost, on WVON’s *Matt McGill Morning Show* in Chicago, one angered caller asked, “Well, if race is an invention and not real, how do you explain racism?” Roberts shared that the politics and social measures as well as the laws and injustices around race are real. However, race is not some default biological category, although it is a social and political identity.

The whole contemplation ripped the lid off a Pandora’s box of questions for me. What decisions do we make because of the limitations or expectations we associate with race? If we cast off those limitations, how would our social lives change? Would we have the same friendships? Live in the same neighborhoods? Go to the same schools? I’d pose these questions to audiences, and it was a daunting thought. Outer obstacles aside, what role have we played in limiting our own lives based on race? The contemplation ultimately led to the *Rayla 2212* series. I wanted to write about a world of people of color where race as we know it today was not a factor. But I also wanted the challenge of writing about people of color without using today’s ethnic cultures as an identity or backdrop while still denoting the value of

the cultures in their past and our present. It was a very Afrofuturistic experiment. For that, I had to take my story to space.

The Birth of the Post-Human

In the fall of 2011, I received a call from Hank Pellissier, then a fellow with the Institute for Ethics and Emerging Technologies. Pellissier was looking for futurists to submit essays. The institute is also a proponent of transhumanism, a futurist philosophy that explores the possibilities of a post-human life. Being human, as we understand it today, could evolve with new technologies. Could science extend our life span by three hundred years? Could new medicine curtail the need for sleep? Transhumanists believe in maximizing human potential and look to exceed human limitations, physical and otherwise, with new medicine, nanotechnology, or robotic culture. Some transhumanists boldly claim that by 2045, humans will officially merge with machines. Ironic, I thought, because that same decade is predicted to mark the beginning of the majority-minority America.

Nevertheless, transhumanism is a fascinating concept. One day being plain old human could be out of school. Physicalities like childbirth (which is already being revolutionized), eating, or death could be tokens of the distant past. But in stretching my imagination to grasp the prospects of post-human life, I found myself thinking about what it means to be human.

We don't give a great deal of thought to being human, although history is marred with theories about and battles over human rights. While some politics and rights are debated, there are some agreed upon human rights that supersede nationality, politics, and expectations—human rights that are deemed inalienable. Life, liberty, and the security of person are among those espoused in the UN's Universal Declaration of Human Rights, as well as the belief that we're all "born free."

At least this is the general consensus today.

But at one point in history, just as monarchies challenged Galileo on his Earth-revolving-around-the-sun theory, scientists and profiteers argued about just who was human and who was not. A color-based, sex-based hierarchy was formed largely to regulate who had access to the world's resources and rights of self-determination and who did not.

The concept is a weird one. One of the most difficult ideas for descendants of enslaved Africans to swallow is that at one point in time, our ancestors were not deemed human. This wasn't just an opinion but rather a legal status encoded in the first version of the US Constitution. By law, enslaved Africans were three-fifths human. None of the rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness that we so proudly celebrate today were extended to women, Native Americans, or anyone who was not a white male. Citizenship rights were only granted to those who were legally human.

"Black people in America came here as chattel, so we've had to constantly prove our humanity," says San Francisco poet and Afro-surrealist D. Scot Miller. "I'm not a shovel, I'm not a horse, I'm a full-blown human being. It's absurd."

In Steven Spielberg's film *Lincoln*, there's a pivotal scene in which radical Republican and antislavery advocate Thaddeus Stephens is drilled by his fellow Congressmen on whether blacks and whites are equal under God or just equal under the law. To convince pro-slavery lawmakers to pass the Thirteenth Amendment abolishing slavery, Stephens had to go against his own code of ethics and emphasize that the soon-to-be-freed slaves should be equal under the law and no more. Watching this dramatic negotiation of human status by lawmakers was heart-wrenching.

Now, the Constitution prior to the Thirteenth Amendment didn't decree that blacks were aliens, or at least it didn't use those words. Those who profited from westward expansion didn't quite say that people of African descent were rocketed from a distant star, either. However, those invested in this new color-based power imbalance did push literature and fake science deeming people of African descent and browner peoples in general as hovering on the lower end of the Darwinian scale. No, they didn't hail from a planet in another solar system, but they were from another world, with mysterious lands and customs that were devalued and vilified to dehumanize.

This dehumanization was wrongfully encoded in laws, violently enforced, perpetuated by propaganda and stereotypes, and falsely substantiated by inaccurate science, all to justify a swath of violent atrocities in the name of greed. Humans have used these methods to dehumanize others. The transatlantic slave trade, Jim Crow in the American South, South African apartheid, the Holocaust in Europe, ethnic cleansing in the former Yugoslavia and in Rwanda, and the massacre of native peoples throughout the world were waged on the basis of others being nonhuman.

What Does It Mean to Be Human?

British writer Mark Sinker was arguably the first to ask, "What does it mean to be human?" in what would later be called the Afrofuturistic context. Sinker, then a writer for *Wired*, posed the question and explored the aspirations, sci-fi themes, and technology in jazz, funk, and hip-hop music.

"In other words, Mark made the correlation between *Blade Runner* and slavery, between the idea of alien abduction and the real events of slavery," writes Kodwo Eshun. "It was an amazing thing, because as soon as I read this, I thought, my God, it just allows so many things."²

Dery identified the parallels in "Black to the Future" as well. "African Americans are, in a very real sense, the descendants of alien abductees," Dery writes. He compares the atrocities of racism experienced by blacks in the United States to "a sci-fi nightmare in which unseen but no less impassable force fields of intolerance frustrate their movement; official histories undo what has been done; and technology too often brought to bear on black bodies (branding, forced sterilization, the Tuskegee experiment, and tasers come readily to mind)."³

Dery and Sinker were not the first to explore the deplorable need of some to dehumanize others in the quest for power. Yet their frameworks led to Afrofuturistic writings that for the first time linked the transatlantic slave trade to a metaphor of alien abduction.

What does it mean to be nonhuman? As a nonhuman, your life is not valued. You are an "alien," "foreign," "exotic," "savage"—a wild one to be conquered or a nuisance to be destroyed. Your bodies are not your own, fit for probing and research. You have no history of value. You are incapable of creating culture in general, but when you do, it is from an impulse or emotion, never intellect. Humans, with meaning or otherwise, can't relate to a nonhuman.

Even the term "illegal alien," often used for undocumented workers moving to nations across the world, plays off fears of otherness, invasion, and takeover. The fear fanned by the fast-approaching minority-majority nation shift in the United States has led to hotly debated laws and policies that mostly target Latino immigrants. Advocates charge that racial profiling and other human-rights violations against on the upswing as undocumented workers and those who fit the ethnic description of the stereotype "illegal alien" fall prey to unjust attacks, violence, or surveillance.

The greater part of the civil rights movement in the United States, as well as self-rule movements in

precolonial India, the Caribbean, and on the African continent, were efforts to ensure equal rights for all. And this struggle paralleled equal efforts to prove that people of color, women, LGBTQ people, the working class, and others were in fact human.

The burden of having to prove one's humanity has defined the attainment of some of the greatest human rights achievements of our times as well as some of the greatest artistic works.

However, this notion of otherness prevails.

The Other Side of the Rainbow

The alien metaphor is one of the most common tropes in science fiction. Whether they are invading, as in *Independence Day*; the ultimate enemy, as portrayed in *Alien*; or misunderstood, like in *E.T.*, there is a societal lesson of conquering or tolerance that reminds viewers of real-life human divisions.

Other films are more explicit in the racial metaphor. *District 9*, a film set in South Africa about segregated alien settlements, was inspired by the horrors of Cape Town's District Six during the apartheid era. *Avatar* is a thinly veiled commentary on imperialism and indigenous cultures. And *The Brother from Another Planet* depicts an extraterrestrial in the form of a black man confused by the racial norms of the day.

Much of the science fiction fascination with earthbound alien encounters is preoccupied with how both cultures could merge and the turmoil that would ensue from overcoming perceptions of difference.

But other artists have compared their wrestling with W. E. B. Du Bois's double consciousness or the struggle of being both American and black with alien motifs. Artists from Sun Ra to Lil Wayne have referenced being alien to explain isolation.

Author Saidiya Hartman wrote in her book *Lose Your Mother* about feeling trapped in a racial paradox: "Was it why I sometimes felt as weary of America as if I too had landed in what was not South Carolina in 1526 or in Jamestown in 1619? Was it the tug of all the lost mothers and orphaned children? Or was it that each generation felt anew the yoke of a damaged life and the distress of being a native stranger, an eternal alien?"⁴

Theorists and the Double Alien

"I think that using alien to describe otherness works," says Reynaldo Anderson, a professor who writes about Afrofuturism. Anderson is one of many theorists who view the alien metaphor as one that explains the looming space of otherness perpetuated by the idea of race. "We're among the first alien abductees, kidnapped by strange people who take us over by ships and conduct scientific experiments on us. They bred us. They came up with a taxonomy of the people they bred: mulatto, octoroon, quadroon."

He adds that the scientific experimentations conducted in the name of race mimic sci-fi horror flicks. Henrietta Lacks was a 1950s Virginia tobacco farmer whose cells were taken without her permission and used to create immortal cell lines sold for research around the world. Named HeLa, these cell lines lived past Lacks's own death and were essential to the development of the polio vaccine, cloning, gene mapping, and in vitro fertilization. They were even sent in the first space missions to see what would happen to cells in zero gravity.

The alien concept has been expanded to explain isolation as well, with studies of "the black geek" in

literature and an array of self-created modalities that infer a discomfort in one's own skin. In summer 2012, Emory University's African-American Studies Collective issued a call for papers for their 2013 conference, titled "Alien Bodies: Race, Space, and Sex in the African Diaspora." Held February 8 and 9, 2013, the conference examined the alien-as-race idea and looked at transformative tools to empower those who are alienated. It explored how "we begin to understand the ways in which race, space and sex configure 'the alien' within spaces allegedly 'beyond' markers of difference" and asked, "What are some ways in which the 'alien from within as well as without' can be overcome, and how do we make the sustainable?"

Afrofuturist academics are looking at alien motifs as a progressive framework to examine how those who are alienated adopt modes of resistance and transformation.

Stranger Than Science Fiction

Truth is stranger than fiction, but is truth stranger than science fiction too? Talk about real-time: science fiction has introduced a flash of technologies that our world is catching up to—the Internet, commercial space flights, smartphones, and the discovery of the Higgs boson, or "God Particle"—to name a few. In some ways we've surpassed the sci-fi canon.

Afrofuturism is concerned with both the impact of these technologies on social conditions and with the power of such technologies to end the "-isms" for good and safeguard humanity. Historically, new technologies have emerged with a double-edged sword, deepening as many divides as they build social bridges. Gunpowder was a technology that empowered colonizers and gave them the undeniable edge in creating color-based caste systems. Early forays into genetics were created to link ethnic physical traits with intelligence, thus falsely justifying dehumanization, slavery, and holocausts across the globe.

The Tuskegee experiment, in which innocent black men were injected with syphilis for scientific study, or the use of the immortal cells of Henrietta Lacks are evidence of how profit and the race discovery must be tempered with strong ethics. "HeLa cells were the first human biological materials ever bought and sold, which helped launch a multibillion-dollar industry," says Rebecca Skloot, author of a book on Lack's immortal cells. "When [Lack's family] found out that people were selling vials of their mother's cells, and that the family didn't get any of the resulting money, they got very angry."⁴

Dorothy Roberts writes about how race is inappropriately used in medical research and to market products. "There are studies to explain racial divisions in health that are actually caused by social inequalities," Roberts said in her interview with me for my blog *The Post Black Experience* (<http://postblackexperience.com>). She continued, "Yet you have researchers studying high blood pressure, asthma among blacks, etc., and looking for a genetic cause. However, research shows the [illnesses] are the effects of racial inequality and the stress of racial inequality."⁵ Although ethics and emerging technologies is a discussion that all futurists are concerned with, Afrofuturists, in particular, are highly sensitive to how or if such technologies will deepen or transcend the imbalances of race.

Son of Saturn

The alien motif reveals dissonance while also providing a prism through which to view the power of the imagination, aspiration, and creativity channeled in resisting dehumanization efforts. "The most important thing about Afrofuturism is to know that there have always been alternatives in what has been given in the present," says Alexander Weheliye. "I am not making light of the history of enslavement and

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