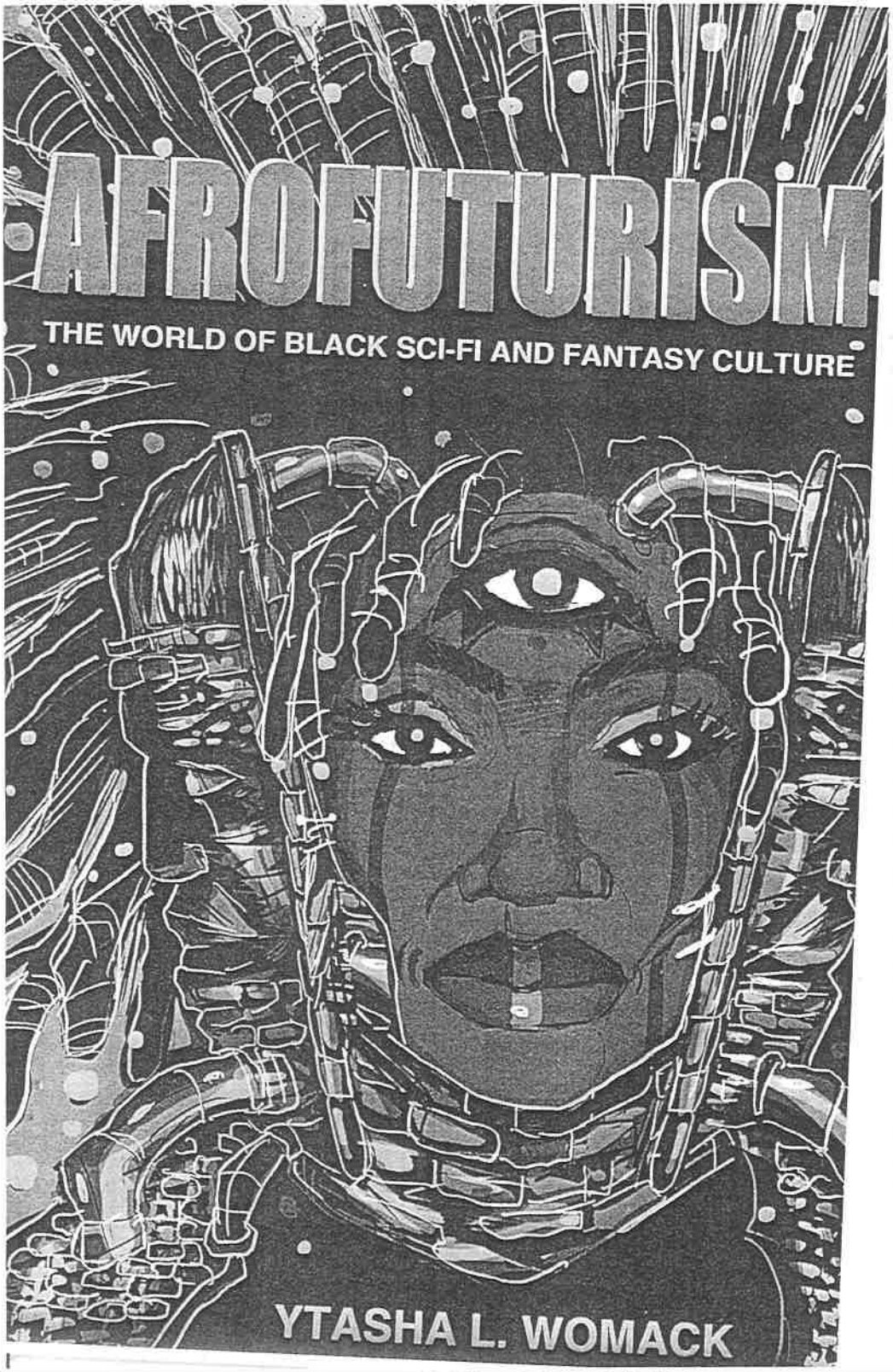


When I was in the fourth grade, I was Princess Leia for Halloween. Leia, the princess and born leader of the rebel forces in *Star Wars Episode IV: A New Hope*, was my heroine in elementary school. It is a distinct memory, because wearing all white with a wooden sword on your hip in a rainstorm and trying 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 archetypical 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 or browner people 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 sex 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 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 at 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 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 2212*, 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 dour 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 by 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 last 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, reimagine 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, space 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 music 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, these 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 the 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 mountaintop 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, all 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 or 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 Reynaldo 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 Sinker, 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 conversations 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 in 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 of 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 2,016. "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, Morehouse, 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 a kick 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 poised wrongdoers against light-seekers, all told in a series of albums. He echoed the double entendres in the 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 an 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 or aesthetics to deconstruct images of the past to revisualize 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 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 commentary 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-sped 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?

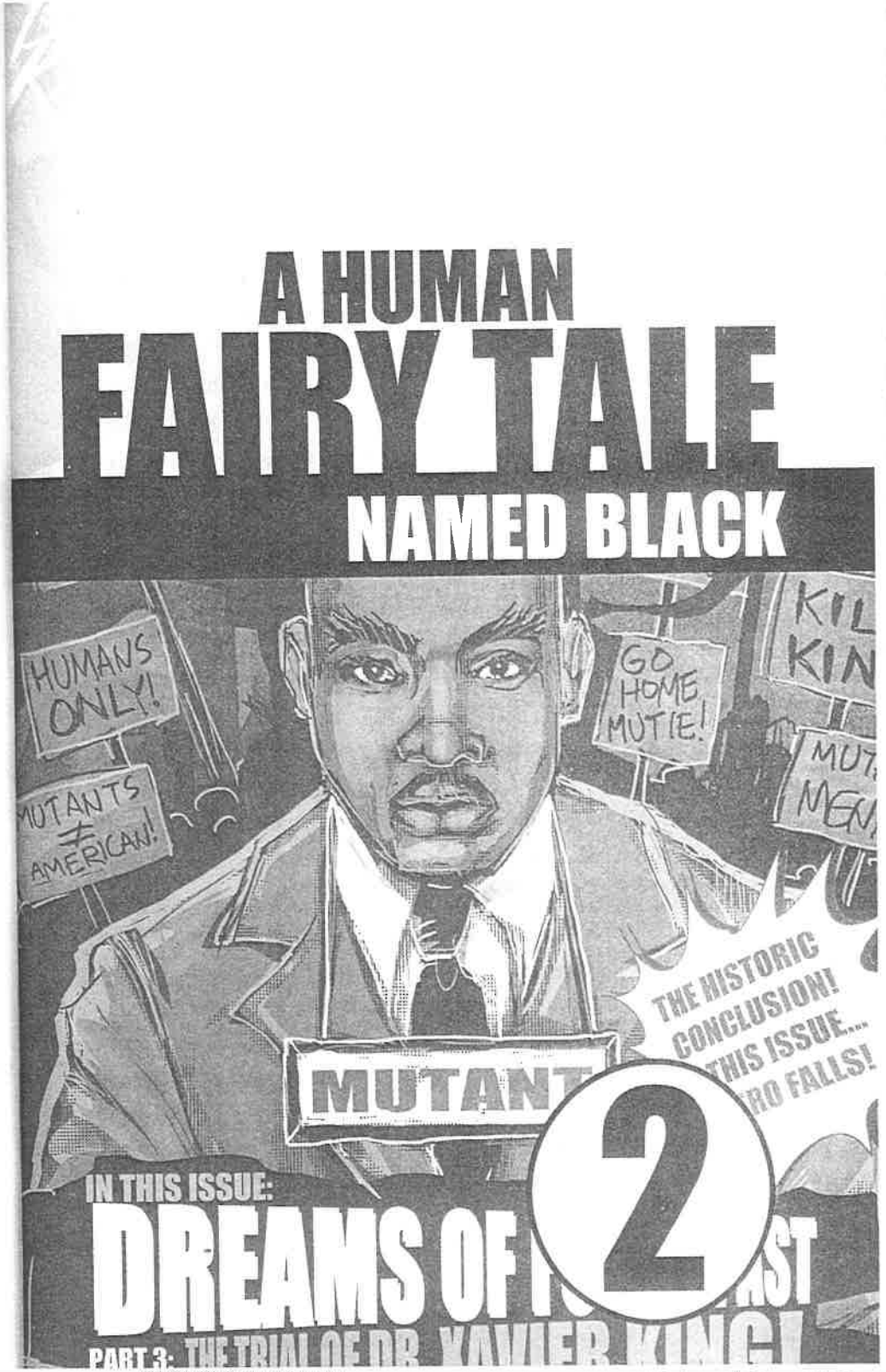
There's a burgeoning group of professors, much like the famed hip-hop professors who emerged a decade ago, who are dedicated to the study of works that analyze dynamics of race and culture specific to the experiences of black people through sci-fi and fantasy works. They use it as a platform to assess 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 counters 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 their image than ever before.

Welcome to the future.



Dr. Mae Jemison, the first black woman to go into space, always liked math and technology. But her space dreams were sparked by watching Lieutenant Uhura, the lone black character on *Star Trek*, each week. The role of Uhura, played by Nichelle Nichols in the 1960s, has been reprised by Zoe Saldana in recent years. Nichols was one of the only black women on television in the 1960s and, next to Diahann Carroll's Julia, one of the few who weren't playing maids.

Uhura was written into *Star Trek* in part to use the show as a commentary about racial equality. But Nichols was frustrated that her character's story line was underutilized, and she submitted a letter of resignation. The story goes that civil rights leader Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. hoped to change her mind.

"He said, 'I'm the biggest Trekkie on the planet and I am Lieutenant Uhura's most ardent fan,'" Nichols recalled. "'You can't abdicate your position,' he said. 'You are changing the minds of people across the world. For the first time, through you, we see ourselves. What we can be, what we are fighting for, what we are marching for.'" Nichols was convinced.[1]

In 2012 Mae Jemison launched the 100 Year Starship project, a nonprofit whose goal is to achieve interstellar travel by 2112.

And it all began with a fictitious character.

Mythmaking

"Women have a different approach in the way that they use Afrofuturism," says art curator Ingrid LaFleur.

On November 11, 2011 (11-11-11), LaFleur launched *My Mythos*, an all-female Afrofuturist art show at Pittsburgh's Fe

Gallery. The show featured critically acclaimed artists Ayanah Moor, Alisha Wormsley, Krista Franklin, Staycee Pearl, and D. Denenge Akpem. "*My Mythos* examines how we create personal mythologies as a vehicle for transformation in order to achieve a new truth," writes LaFleur. The artists, she adds, are "visionaries guiding our consciousness into their imagined realities."

Most mythical creations are borrowed from ancient stories, but in Afrofuturism, artists are encouraged to create their own. Franklin, a poet and mixed-media collagist, showcased her series *The Untold Legend of Naima Brown*. Brown is a young shape-shifter who leaves a trail of coiled hair after every transformation. "She's a shape-shifter who could weave hair," says LaFleur. According to the myth, a childhood friend collects the hair, and the works in Franklin's show are made of Brown's remnants.

Wormsley created a story of a postapocalyptic world in which only black women and white men survived. "The men are trying to procreate, and they are in a sterile environment. So these women are in pods, and there's a video that explains the whole story," says LaFleur.

Akpem featured ceiling-draped decor inspired by her ancestors who moved to California for the Gold Rush. "She has these really great golden nuggets that swirl around," says LaFleur. A choreographer, Pearl's multimedia display cast a dancer transitioning from familiar to unfamiliar worlds. Moore, a printmaker, made her first multimedia work, an image of *Ebony* magazine that moved along a scanner. "She left it up to us to create our own mythology," says LaFleur.

Afrofuturism is a free space for women, a door ajar, arms wide open, a literal and figurative space for black women to be

themselves. They can dig behind the societal reminders of blackness and womanhood to express a deeper identity and then use this discovery to define blackness, womanhood, or any other identifier in whatever form their imagination allows.

Afrofuturists are not the first women to do this. Fine artist Elizabeth Catlett, author Zora Neale Hurston, and anthropologist/choreographer Katherine Dunham, among others, used imagination, art, and technology to redefine black and female expressions. However, Afrofuturism as a movement itself may be the first in which black women creators are credited for the power of their imaginations and are equally represented as the face of the future and the shapers of the future. Afrofuturism celebrates women like Catlett, Hurston, and Dunham for using the imagination as a space of resistance and establishes a lineage of this history of thought.

In Afrofuturism, black women's imagination, image, and voice are not framed by the pop expectations and sensibilities of the day. The black woman is not held to Middle America's norms, trying to prove that she's not government dependent or aspiring to the beauty ideals in the latest blogs. Nor is there some uniform expectation of blackness that she is called to maintain. Women develop theories, characters, art, and beauty free of the pressures of meeting male approval, societal standards, color-based taxonomies, or run-of-the-mill female expectations. The results are works that some critics call uncategorizable.

While the work is uncategorizable, so too are the creators. Janelle Monáe's song "Q.U.E.E.N." featuring Erykah Badu questions the concept of being a freak or exuding a natural, self-sustaining independence that doesn't fit neatly into society's

modest expectations about women of color. They defy acceptable behavior particularly regarding dancing and appearance, with free-form dancing and eccentric dress interpreted as sexual, provocative, and largely unsettling. I'm reminded of a dance performance by A'Keitha Carey at a recent black existentialism conference. Carey, who is exploring Afrofuturism in dance, performed her dance style, CaribFunk, a fusion of classical ballet, modern, pilates fitness, and Afro-Carribean dance styles. The performance highlighted hip rotations, akin to belly dancing, and fluid arm movements. Let me note that the performance was not designed to tease sexually or stir up any sensuous emotions. After presenting, one curious male observer asked her how does one look at such a performance and not think about sexuality? How does one not objectify the performer? The very presence of a woman in control of her body was unsettling and for some triggered instant objectification. "They call us dirty because we break all your rules down," Monáe sings in "Q.U.E.E.N." "Even it makes others uncomfortable, I wanna love who I am."

Magic Is Real

Many Afrofuturist authors are described as sci-fi and Afro-surrealist, magical realist and fantasy, simply because their work links science, nature, and magic as one. It's a thin line to walk.

L. A. Banks wrote the *Vampire Huntress* series. Although her work is technically horror and follows a young woman coming of age, the multiculturalism, historical context of African and South American cultures, and the earth-based magic had her writing beyond genre. Toni Morrison is known for mixing hauntings

and spirituality, too. Neither woman used Afrofuturism as her paradigm, but this world-crossing quest where the visible is as alive as the invisible punctuates art by black women. Artist/professors John Jennings and Stanford Carpenter call this presence of ghost stories and hauntings in black literature and art the "ethno-gothic" and believes it's a way of dealing with cultural trauma. But the expression of mysticism and nature is reminiscent of the divine feminine recognized in faiths across the world.

In general, Afrofuturism is a home for the divine feminine principle, a Mother Earth ideal that values nature, creativity, receptivity, mysticism, intuition, and healing as partners to technology, science, and achievement. The divine feminine is the other side to the information-gathering process, and tapping into it is a process of choice for many Afrofuturists. There's a widespread belief that humankind has lost a connection to nature, to the stars, to a cosmic sense of self, and that reclaiming the virtues of the divine feminine will lead to wholeness. Many men in the genre embrace the principle as much as the women do.

In film, the idea of a divine feminine is best represented by the Oracle in the *Matrix* trilogy. Played by Gloria Foster in the first two films and Mary Alice in the third, the Oracle is Neo's guide to understanding himself. But rather than giving clear-cut advice, the Oracle is more likely to give Neo thoughts to ponder, and he must make sense of her wisdom with his power of choice.

"You've already made the choice," she tells Neo. "Now you have to understand it."[2]

Valuing the divine feminine is one way that Afrofuturism differs from sci-fi and the futurist movements in the past. In Afrofuturism, technological achievement alone is not enough to create

a free-thinking future. A well-crafted relationship with nature is intrinsic to a balanced future too.

The feminine aspect of humanity reigns freely in Afrofuturism. The subconscious and intuition, which metaphysical studies dub as the feminine side of us all, are prioritized in the genre. This feminine side is neither guided by Western mythology nor limited by popular takes on history. Women Afrofuturists have decision-making power over their creative voice. They make their own standards and sculpt their own lens through which to view the world and for the world to view them. Most important, their voice is not specifically shaped in opposition to a male or racist perspective. While Afrofuturist women are obviously shaped by modern gender issues, their creations and theories themselves emerge from a space that renders such limitations moot. The main commonality is their individuality and a desire to encourage free thinking and end the -isms that have plagued the present and the recent past.

Afrofuturist women get a kick out of rewiring their audiences. The muses and icons that've inspired the genre always appear to have sprung up from nowhere. Grace Jones, Octavia Butler, Erykah Badu, Janelle Monáe, for example, are just hard to place. Even their personal histories and private lives are shrouded in mystery. On the surface, these women don't fit neatly into any artistic movement or the history of the times without a healthy dose of explanation.

"Am I a freak? Or just another little weirdo? Call me weak, or better yet—you can call me your hero, baby," Janelle Monáe sings in the song "Faster."

"That's what I've always been fighting for," Monáe says, "making sure that people love themselves for who they are, and

we don't pick on people because we're uncomfortable with ourselves, or who they are. That's been my message, from when I was young to now. There are lots of young girls out there who are struggling with their identities, afraid of being discriminated against or teased. I take risks and use my imagination so that other people will feel free and take risks. That's my hope."[3]

Read Nnedi Okorafor's book *Who Fears Death*, visit D. Denenge Akpem's performance installation *Alter-Destiny 888* or a dance performance by A'Keitha Carey, and flip through Afua Richardson's comic illustrations, and there's a conscious reorientation process that takes place, almost as if you were dropped into a far-off land. But the land feels familiar, a reality that is soothing for some and unsettling for others. It's as if the artists want you to remember something, and they discuss it in such a matter-of-fact way that you figure you must know. But do you? There's an unconscious game of trying to remember a memory, a time or space when and where these familiar oddities weren't so bizarre. It's the familiarity with the seemingly bizarre that leads to the aha moment. Female Afrofuturists create their own norm, and the rest of the world just tries to catch up.

A Star Is Born

Afrofuturism has a star-is-born quality to it. Either morphing from the head of Zeus or crafted from clay like Wonder Woman or her black sister Nubia, there's just a supernatural quality to engaging in the work. Grace Jones is no exception. Jones is a pop-culture phenom whose bold antics, outlandish personality, and dazzling looks defied all norms. There was absolutely nothing about her

that was conventional when she hit the world stage in the late 1970s. She is Josephine Baker post women's lib and the black liberation movement, with a steely, feminine-yet-androgynous look that came to define early '80s style and has resurged in the twenty-first century.

A preacher's daughter born in Jamaica, Jones moved to New York as a child and built on her theater training to make the world her stage. Her rocket was launched in the club scene and fashion houses of New York and Paris, where she bridged the exotic and the futuristic in a shock-and-awe manner that screamed power. She was a muse to Andy Warhol, and while she was popular in the 1970s and '80s, by the twenty-first century—when nouveau pop stars recreated her style—she had juggernauted into legend status.

Jones recorded a couple of disco singles in the mid-1970s and eventually landed a record deal with Island Records in 1977. She went on to record a string of underground dance hits in the late '70s and '80s and continued to make music into the 2000s, most recently in 2008. Although her electronic new-wave sound captured the radical shift in music in the 1970s, she is most popular for her radical fashion and style. "I've always been a rebel," says Jones. "I never do things the way they're supposed to be done. Either I go in the opposite direction or I create a new direction for myself, regardless of what the rules are or what society says."[4]

In a 1985 performance at Paradise Garage, an underground dance club, Jones's body-paint adornments and colorful metal-and-wire costume (both designed and executed by artist Keith Haring) morphed native art ideas into futuristic fashion.

A tall, lithe, brown-skinned woman whose angular features were accented by her square-shaped hairdo, everything Jones did in fashion became iconic decades later. "Models are there to look like mannequins, not like real people. Art and illusion are supposed to be fantasy," she says. Her red-carpet looks were jaw-dropping. Her concerts were scary gender-bending carnivals of role reversals. She sported a flattop and fade, a style many black men would adopt nearly a decade later, when most women were going for big-hair glam looks. She established the shoulder-padded look of the '80s that made a high-fashion comeback in 2010. She sported severely tailored pantsuits just as more women entered the workforce.

Styled almost exclusively by Jean-Paul Goude from the late 1970s until the mid-1980s, everything about Jones's outfits, from nude appearances in body paint to floor-length hooded gowns, has been mimicked by Madonna, Lady Gaga, Rihanna, and others. Her style and aggression, boldness and otherworldly reach, embodied Goude's look of the future. Jones's appearances were—and still are—spectacles. In 2012, at age sixty-four, she performed at Queen Elizabeth's Diamond Jubilee celebration. She twirled a hula hoop around her svelte physique while singing "Slave to the Rhythm" and wearing a black-and-red bodysuit and a giant red headdress.

Jones redefined the ideas of beauty, sexuality, and femininity. She wielded fashion as her weapon of choice and inverted beauty standards and women's roles, mesmerizing people in their discomfort. Although she had the help of stylists and producers, Jones has always been Jones.

"But I'm a free spirit," she says. "Where is the wrong? How do I put a limit to freedom?"[5]

Feminist Space

"Afrofuturism is a feminist movement," says Alondra Nelson, Columbia University professor and Afrofuturism theorist who launched the now-legendary Internet Listserv for Afrofuturists. The complex black women characters in black sci-fi stories and the plethora of Afrofuturist women in the arts and beyond are no accident, she says. "There have always been black feminists at the center of the project," she adds.

Many women theorists expanded Afrofuturism's early infatuation with music titans and film to include other arts and social transformation. Sheree R. Thomas, editor of *Dark Matter: A Century of Speculative Fiction from the African Diaspora*, assembled the first major collection of African American science fiction, even including a short story by W. E. B Du Bois. University of Southern California professor Anna Everett organized the early AfroGEEKS conferences that tackled the potential use of the Internet for social change and transformation. And Professor Kara Keeling forged groundbreaking queer-studies research through Afrofuturism.

But claiming a space as feminist doesn't mean it's for women only. What makes a feminist space? "One characteristic is the empowerment of women to work and make decisions in an egalitarian environment," says feminist Jennie Ruby. "Another is the acceptance of women's bodies in all shapes, ages, sizes, and abilities." She continues that, in a feminist space, there's a democracy, a sharing of the workload, and a goal of "valuing nurturance

and cooperation over aggression and competition, and working against sexism, racism, heterosexism, ageism, and classism."[6]

"[Afrofuturism] is not a space that women are finding identity; it is a feminist space," Nelson affirms. "Of course it's a space for women to feel empowered, because it's a way to critique the ways people associate with science and technology. I think technology inherently opens the space for women to be central figures in that."

Just as contributions from African descendants to the world's knowledge are frequently viewed as cultural, rather than scientific, the same can be said when looking at the contributions of black women, says Nelson. She points to Madam C. J. Walker, who is widely known as being the first self-made woman millionaire in the US, though she was never hailed as an inventor for creating the products that launched her hair-care empire.

"If Afrofuturism is Africana or black people and engagement and invention around imagination around science and technology, then Madam C. J. Walker fits squarely. The work she was doing was chemistry. It's a kind of technology that was at the prowess of her as a businessperson," says Nelson.

Butler's Renaissance

Octavia Butler is the third point in the Afrofuturism trinity (Sun Ra and George Clinton are the others). Although Harlem-born sci-fi writer Samuel Delany was the first widely recognized black sci-fi writer, Butler struck a special chord with women. "As much as there is an Afrofuturism lineage that comes from Sun Ra, there's one that comes from Octavia Butler," says Nelson.

In a hypermale sci-fi space where science and technology dominate, Butler provided a blueprint for how women, particularly women of color, could operate in these skewed realities and distant worlds. Butler set the stage for multidimensional black women in complex worlds both past and present, women who are vulnerable in their victories and valiant in their risky charge to enlighten humanity.

Butler is known as a sci-fi writer, but like author Nalo Hopkinson, she includes magical surrealism, or seeming magic, in her chosen realities. Moreover, Butler's religious metaphors, central feminine narratives, use of African diasporic mysticism, and the transformative power of love are tenets that many Afrofuturists weave into their work. She gave many women a voice and validated their mashed-up mix of women's issues, race, sci-fi, mysticism, and the future.

"She blew my mind," says award-winning sci-fi writer Nnedi Okorafor, who is amongst Butler's biggest fans. "I was writing these things, and I didn't realize that what I was writing could be published until after I read her work." Okorafor is author of several books, including *Zahrah the Windseeker* and *Who Fears Death*. Both books have hero lead characters with mystical abilities.

"Octavia Butler in her own way served as a role model," says speculative fiction writer N. K. Jemisin. "The [sci-fi] genre itself sends a very clear message that you are not welcome here. I know that every black female writer felt, 'Oh, here's someone like me, and it's OK for us to be here.' Without that moment of validation, that it's OK to be here, I don't know if you'd have as many black women writing in this arena," says Jemisin, who estimates there

are at least fifty established black women sci-fi and fantasy writers who are published.

Jemisin was writing sci-fi and fantasy when she was a child. But she didn't write black or women lead characters until she stumbled across Octavia Butler as a teen. "While reading, I said, 'Holy crap, I think this woman is black.' I looked for a photo, and there was none. Instead the book's cover was plastered with the image of a white woman." Photo aside, it was a lightbulb moment for Jemisin. "I had never seen that in sci-fi before," she says. She never thought her lead could be anything other than a white man.

Jemisin's debut novel, *The Hundred Thousand Kingdoms*, was nominated for a Nebula Award, Hugo Award, and the World Fantasy Award. Her follow-up series, *The Killing Moon*, traces the journey and politics of priests in a society reminiscent of ancient Egypt.

There are more women images in science fiction, thanks to Butler and writers like Tananarive Due and Nalo Hopkinson, and the emergence of female sci-fi writers is changing the dynamics of women characters in sci-fi and fantasy. In general, Jemisin feels there's more fascination with the female physique and function than the woman as a whole in most science fiction. She says, "It's a woman through the male gaze—what a woman has to look like to be interesting to men. But it's not as common as it used to be."

Butler herself is often described as a writer's writer. Born in 1948 and reared in sunny Pasadena, California, she says she was inspired to write at age twelve after she watched a campy sci-fi film and figured that she could do better. She is most known for the formerly titled *Xenogenesis* trilogy, since renamed *Lilith's*

Brood for reissue by Warner, the novel *Kindred*, and her *Parable* series. Her heroines are intriguing, overcoming traumas in new lands as a right of passage of sorts in their own evolution.

Alanna Verrick, the adopted daughter of white missionaries, is the heroine in Butler's *Survivor*, the genesis of her Patternmaster myth. Alanna leaves Earth with her adopted parents in the twentieth century to form an Earth colony on an already inhabited planet where half of the planet's warring indigenous citizens are addicted to a powerful drug. Although the missionaries side with the more human-looking, drug-addicted inhabitants, Alanna leads the opposing rebel crew, overcomes addiction, and guides them to a better place in a style reminiscent of the biblical Moses. Her incredible diplomacy, love, and sacrifice win respect.

In *Wild Seed*, Anyanwu, a West African healer with shapeshifting abilities, wrestles with love, desire, and fate through a tortuous bond with the immortal Doru. The twisted relationship sends them through the Middle Passage to Slave States America. Anyanwu, on a quest to create gifted lineage, moves through time and space operating as both man and woman to father and mother ingenious offspring. At one point, she morphs into a dolphin.

Many Afrofuturist writers and artists credit their complex story lines and the popularity of women heroines in Afrofuturist novels and art to Butler's influence with writers, filmmakers, and artists. They point to Butler's quintessential writing as both benchmark and inspiration. Celebrated choreographer and performance artist Staycee Pearl staged *Octavia*, a dance project that dissects Butler's work and life story. Nicole Mitchell composed a symphony to accompany Butler's work, and artist Krista Franklin

makes art that depicts Butler's stories. The Carl Brandon Society, an organization dedicated to increasing the representation of people of color in fantastical genres, offers an Octavia E. Butler Memorial Scholarship. Moreover, Spelman College, a college in Atlanta for black women, hosted the Octavia E. Butler Celebration of the Fantastic Arts.

Windseeker

Nnedi Okorafor won the World Fantasy Award in 2011 for her novel *Who Fears Death*. The story follows a black woman in postapocalyptic Africa who studies under a mystical shaman to discover powers that can end the genocide of her people. The child of a brutal attack, her sandy color raises the ire and curiosity of all who see her. Her name is Onyesonwu, which means "who fears death."

Like many Afrofuturist authors, and Butler, before her, Okorafor has a tendency to write beyond the tropes of genre. Her book has been described as magical surrealist, fantasy, and sci-fi. Okorafor says, "There's shamanism, there's juju in it, there's magic, genocide, female circumcision. It deals with issues of African men and women. I based my juju on actual Ebo traditional beliefs. It pulls on the fantastical too."

Okorafor, a Nigerian immigrant to the United States and professor at Chicago State University, writes characters who are outsiders that straddle two worlds. Her books are also pointed cultural critiques. Her depiction of female circumcision, a controversial procedure, drew criticism from several African academics. She named her main character in *Zahrah the Windseeker* Dada,

which means "a child born with naturally (dread)locked hair." "Before colonialism, that was very special. But after colonialism, it was considered evil," she says. And her flagrant use of the term had some calling Okorafor a witch. She says, "My fourth book was titled *Akata Witch*. It's a derogatory term for African Americans or American-born Nigerians. *Akata* means 'bush animal.' It's not a very nice term. The book deals with those issues too."

Collective memory and trauma is an issue that concerns some Afrofuturists, and many women artists and writers use the aesthetic as a healing device. D. Denenge Akpem, who teaches Afrofuturism as a pathway for liberation, studies how ritual healing in art can heal trauma, particularly in women. Her performance installation *Alter-Destiny 888* was one of her foray's into the possibilities of Afrofuturism as ritual. The show opened on August 8, 2008 (8-8-8), at the Roger Smith Hotel in New York. For ten days, Akpem performed a self-created ritual of song, including the creation and destruction of clay babies, the building of an elaborate headpiece in honor of the trickster god Pan, and the mashing of remaining clay to dust. "The piece was based on the concept of the alter destiny and of transformation that Sun Ra addressed," Akpem told Tempestt Hazel, curator/cofounder of Sixty Inches From Center: The Chicago Arts Archive and Collective Project. "But it was personalized in the sense that I focused primarily on the question of whether one does have the power to alter one's destiny and whether one might act as conduit to affect global destiny or to heal trauma in collective cellular and psychic memory," she said, noting that women hide their trauma.[7]

She continued, "What alternate destinies were set in motion through this performance-installation, I am honestly not sure.

What I do know is that the intention was there; the manifestation occurred."

Butler may have inspired black women in sci-fi, and Delany, a sci-fi titan we'll discuss later, helped shape the literary canon of the twentieth century, but African American sci-fi and speculative fiction began long before either of them was born.

W. E. B. Du Bois is an American icon. He is known for countless achievements that shifted race dynamics in America: he was one of the quintessential proponents of civil rights in the early twentieth century, he was amongst the founders of the NAACP, he was a proponent of higher education among blacks, he was one of the early black-history documentarians and founded a sociology department at Atlanta University, he was a Pan-Africanist. Du Bois's theories defined turn-of-the-century strategies on race. His dueling views with Tuskegee University founder Booker T. Washington are classic. Both men, we've discovered, were right. Du Bois's essays on double consciousness and the Talented Tenth are still hot topics in the new millennium.

But few know that Du Bois was also a science fiction writer.

"The Comet," a short story that first appeared in a 1920 collection titled *Darkwater: Voices from Within the Veil*, is Du Bois's primary sci-fi work. The story follows Jim Davis, a black man who quietly resents the nation's skin games. He's sent into a dangerous underground vault to retrieve records—a task no white man would do, he dutifully notes. During his subterranean quest, a mysterious comet hits, and Davis is the last man standing. But he quickly grows comfortable with his ill-timed fate, dining in a whites-only restaurant and driving his own car. Suddenly the freedom that escaped him in daily life is at his fingertips. Clearly, this disaster has some advantages. He meets a young white woman who was also saved in the peril. Although she initially can't see Davis past her bias and views his brown skin as alien, she moves past prejudice and falls for him. The responsibility of repopulating Earth consumes her passion. Just as the two are about to consummate their love, they are discovered by a rescue

team. To Davis's dismay, the comet destroyed New York, but the rest of the world is the same. The woman returns to her wealthy husband, and Davis remains at the bottom of the status quo.[1]

In Du Bois's analogy, race imbalances were so entrenched that only a catastrophe could bring equity. What is a catastrophe for most of the city—a town ravaged by death and destruction—is a fresh new start with thwarted hopes of self-expression and prosperity for Davis and people of color.

I'm not surprised that Du Bois would write a sci-fi story. As a man who devised strategies for eradicating race imbalances for much of his life and who staunchly believed that intellectual achievement could bring political parity, sci-fi was both a great release and the ideal tool to ponder the what-ifs in climbing through a rigid race-based social structure. He placed a thoughtful black man at the heart of his story and displayed the frailties and dilemmas of hope in a world resistant to change. As a fervent activist, Du Bois pushed for many social changes, most of which blossomed after his lifetime. With the tug and pull of a transitioning landscape at the turn of the century—the hope of the end of slavery, the horror at the institution of Jim Crow and mob lynchings, the progression of a small upper class, and the undermining of the larger masses—I wonder if Du Bois, too, felt like he was seesawing between progress and devolution.

However, Du Bois was one of many activists who, beginning in the nineteenth century, used speculative fiction and sci-fi to hash out ideas about race, re-create futures with black societies, and make poignant commentary about the times. We don't know how many black speculative writers were published in the late nineteenth century. The dime novels and pulp magazines of the

day didn't reveal the race of their writers, and it was assumed they were white.

"I believe I first heard Harlan Ellison make the point that we know of dozens upon dozens of early pulp writers only as names: They conducted their careers entirely by mail—in a field and during an era when pen-names were the rule rather than the exception," writes Samuel Delany, one of the first-major African American science fiction writers of the twentieth century. "Among the 'Remmington C. Scotts' and the 'Frank P. Joneses' who litter the contents pages of the early pulps, we simply have no way of knowing if one, three, or seven of them—or even many more—were not blacks, Hispanics, women, native Americans, Asians, or whatever. Writing is like that."[2]

However, a number of short stories and articles have surfaced, most written by well-meaning activists who, for fleeting moments, turned to speculative fiction to articulate their frustrations and hopes for the future. Martin Delany, for example, was born in West Virginia to a free mother and slave father in 1812. He became one of the first African Americans to attend Harvard Medical School and was the first African American field officer in the Civil War. It was allegedly his proposition and not that of colleague Frederick Douglass that convinced Lincoln to use black soldiers in the war. Delany helped Douglass and William Lloyd Garrison launch the *North Star* newspaper, one of the leading abolitionist papers of the era, in the 1840s. An abolitionist himself, Delany worked with escaped slaves and adopted early black nationalistic beliefs, later doing some work to acquire land in Liberia.

However, Delany was a writer as well. Shortly after the slave insurrection panics of 1856 and the *Dred Scott* decision of

1857—which declared that blacks were not citizens of any state—and a year shy of the war that would split the nation in two, Delany released *Blake: or, the Huts of America*, a speculative fiction serial. The story follows Henry Blake, a revolutionary who convinces blacks in the United States to rise up and found a black nation in Cuba. The story was partially published in the *Anglo American* in 1859 and republished in the *Weekly Anglo American* from 1861 to 1862.[3] *Blake* was published as a book in 1970.

Social activist and Baptist minister Sutton E. Griggs was born in Chatfield, Texas, in 1872. He published more than thirty-three books encouraging African American solidarity and pride. But his best-known work is the controversial *Imperium in Imperio*. Published in 1899, the book is a response to Edward Bellamy's utopian *Looking Backward* and a criticism of its handling of race. *Imperium in Imperio* follows African American friends Belton Piedmont and Bernard Belgrave, both of whom graduate from college. Bernard is elected congressman, and Belton heads to a black college in Louisiana, only to be lynched. Belton survives the lynching, kills the doctor who tries to vivisect him, and wins in court due to Bernard's stellar defense. Belton invites Bernard to join the Imperium in Imperio, a secret African American government in Waco, Texas. Belton wants assimilation; Bernard wants revolution. Bernard's plan to take over Texas and make it an African American nation state is approved by the society, and Belton is executed by the Imperium.

New York lawyer and educator Edward A. Johnson also was inspired by *Looking Backward* and wrote the book *Light Ahead for the Negro* in 1904. A work of utopian speculative fiction, Johnson's book depicts an African American at the turn of the twentieth

century who visits America in 2006. Blacks in the South can read, and the coveted forty acres and a mule have finally been distributed. The book shows how the post-racial world evolved over the century. A decade later, in 1917, Bellamy was elected the first African American to serve in the New York State legislature.

Francis E. W. Harper was a social reformer, feminist, and one of the most popular poets of her time. Her book *Iola Leroy*, published in 1892, takes place against a feminist backdrop in which the races are unequal. Iola, the main character of the story, is a pro-slavery Southern belle who learns that her mother was a slave of mixed heritage, therefore meaning that Iola, too, is a slave. "The rest of the novel captures her adventures, and concludes with the establishment of Harper's version of the 'ideal polity'—women active as doctors and activists, large schools taught by married women, and an area in which former slaves can live peacefully and productively. In the context of 1892 and Reconstruction South, this image was indeed a fantastic utopia," writes author and librarian Jess Nevins.[4]

In 1902 Pauline Hopkins, one of the most influential black editors of the early twentieth century, wrote *Of One Blood*, a book that was serialized in the *Colored American*. Protagonist Reuel Briggs, who has little interest in African American history, travels to Ethiopia on an archaeological expedition and discovers the ancient city of Telessar, inhabited by the descendants of the Ethiopia of 6000 BCE and owners of advanced crystal-based technology and telepathy technology.

George S. Schuyler was a Rhode Island–born journalist who both criticized organized religion and was known for more conservative views. He was not a fan of most literature from the Harlem

Renaissance nor was he an admirer of Du Bois. His book *Black No More* profiles a scientist who discovers how to turn black people white. The satire includes a horrid description of the lynching of the money-grubbing inventors by a crowd of whites that painstakingly recreates the gruesome lynchings of black men in the South. In his series "Black Internationale" and "Black Empire," published in the *Pittsburgh Courier* between 1936 and 1938, is the story of Carl Slater, a journalist for the fictional *Harlem Blade* who covers a global battle between white people and people of color. A wealthy intellect leads the battle, gathering top minds in the black diaspora who are frustrated with inequality. The brilliant collective, called Black Internationale, brings the United States to its knees with biological warfare, liberates Africa from its colonizers, and launches air raids that crush Europe. A young, white, female stockbroker aids the movement and becomes head of the European espionage unit.[5]

The idea of using sci-fi and speculative fiction to spur social change, to reexamine race, and to explore self-expression for people of color, then, is clearly nothing new. The black visionaries of the past who sought to alleviate the debilitating system and end the racial divide used these genres as devices to articulate their issues and visions.

This tradition continued with Samuel Delany, Octavia Butler, and Nalo Hopkinson, all of whom merged issues of race, class, sex, sexuality, culture, and identity to make sense of the changing times. Their worlds included people of color, but the issue of otherness was wrapped in a sci-fi space saga that zapped from shape-shifters to gender benders to alien pods, time travel, and killer bodysuits.

Nalo Hopkinson was born in 1960 in Kingston, Jamaica, to a Jamaican mother and Guyanese father. She has lived throughout the Caribbean and South America with stints in the United States and Canada. One of the foremost speculative fiction writers of modern times, she's edited anthologies and published dozens of books and short stories. Caribbean dialect and culture are entrenched in many of her stories, and she candidly deals with postmodern issues of culture, race, and sex.

Brown Girl in the Ring was her first novel. Published in 1998, the dystopian tale depicts a rebel-led Toronto under siege, and the book was hailed for depicting the Carribean community in Toronto and adeptly writing in dialect. The story combines Carribean mysticism and futuristic medicine and includes a disturbing plot involving organ harvesting. But the terror of the city leads the main character to discover some of the old ways and traditions of her grandmother. The book *Sister Mine* follows formerly conjoined twins Makeda and Abby, daughters of a demigod and a human mother. One has magical powers and the other does not, but the two must reconcile to help find their father who disappeared mysteriously.

Hopkinson's short story "Ganger (Ball Lightning)" is a sci-fi story that almost reads like a dark comedy. Published in the anthology *Dark Matter: A Century of Speculative Fiction from the African Diaspora* in 2000, Hopkinson's story plays off Isaac Asimov's 1940s robot stories. Cleve and Issy are a married couple who don't talk anymore. They buy full-bodied sex suits in hopes of saving their marriage only to have the suits turn on them.[6]

"She's a powerful writer with an imagination that most of us would kill for," says Pulitzer Prize–winning author Junot Díaz. "I have read everything she has written and am in awe of her

many gifts. And her protagonists are unforgettable—formidable haunted women drawn with an almost unbearable honesty—seriously, who writes sisters like Nalo? Takes courage to be that true." According to sci-fi scholar Gary K. Wolfe, Nalo's family-centered dramas inspired other writers to go beyond sci-fi norms and build on family relationships, too.[7]

By age twenty-six Samuel Delany had written more than eight sci-fi books and won three Nebula Awards. Algis Budrys, a critic with *Galaxy* magazine, declared that Delany, fresh off the release of *Nova*, was "the best science fiction writer in the world." He is one of the most decorated and best-known science fiction writers in the world, credited with influencing cyberpunk as well as Afrofuturism. Some of his later books include intense sexuality that Delany himself has called pornography. He is an inductee in the Science Fiction Hall of Fame and has won four Nebula Awards and two Hugo awards. He has more than twenty novels to his credit.

However, in his essay "Racism and Science Fiction," Delany questions the desire of science fiction institutions to group him with former students Butler and Hopkinson, noting that outside of their race, their work, backgrounds, ages, and perspectives are drastically different. However, the Harlem-born legend adds that the best way to end the "pre-judging" in science fiction worlds is to encourage more nonwhite readers and writers to participate and discuss issues at conferences. When some 20 percent of the audience is composed of people of color the landscape for writers and readers will change, he writes.

When Delany's essay was published in 2000, Afrofuturism as a defined genre had taken root and cadres of writers were looking

to Delany, Butler, Hopkinson, and others as literary hallmarks in a genre that was all too dismissive of diversity. In 1999, the Carl Brandon Society was created to increase diversity in speculative fiction. One of its tenants is to "fantasize for its own sake and as an agent of social change." The society offers an Octavia Butler scholarship, honors accomplished writers, and provides supports for new work. More than a decade later, the diversity of sci-fi work and the creators in fiction has given rise to writers like Nnedi Okorafor and N. K. Jemisin, but there are countless others emerging as well. Words inspire visuals. Afrofuturism's visual aesthetic is a playground for the imagination.

There's something about African American culture in particular that dictates that all cultural hallmarks and personal evolutions are recast in a historical lineage. Whether it's the concept of prophesy and speaking into the future or tropes of the past shadowing the present, whether by need or by narrative, many speak as if the future, past, and present are one. The threads that bind can be as divergent as a tersely worded tweet, musical chord, fiery speech, ancient Kemetic symbol, Bible quote, starry night, or string theory, but there's an idea that the power of thought, word, and the imagination can somehow transcend time. Just as the right words and actions can speak the future into existence, the same can recast the past, too. This cyclical nature of time and the contemplation of it all is a favorite theme and conversation point for Afrofuturists.

Time travel is a popular theme in science fiction. From H. G. Wells's *The Time Machine* to the classic film *Back to the Future*, the ideas of rewinding the clock or fast-forwarding into the future have piqued the curiosity of the world's best minds, creators, and scientists. In fact, the ideas are so ingrained in pop culture that the common time-zapping themes are nearly cliche. How many characters have leapfrogged into the past to "fix" some wrong only to screw up the future and be forced to DeLorean their way back again? How many times has a well-meaning attempt to alter time trapped the main character in a series of parallel universes? The morals and ethics have been tossed about by sci-fi fans and pop culture lovers alike. Even the new-school fields of quantum physics and quantum mechanics are based on the likely premise that time is relative. The popularity of documentaries like *What the Bleep Do We Know!?*, about quantum physics and new

discoveries about space and time, provides more proof of the abundant probabilities of jetting through the here and now.

"What physicists are discovering right now is so bizarre it almost sounds like science fiction, like we're not talking about science anymore," said Fred Alan Wolf—aka Dr. Quantum—physicist and author.[1]

Time travel, parallel universes, the multiverse, and the Higgs boson are on a fast-track collision with the best in sci-fi. Time travel dominates Afrofuturism as well. Whether it's a lighthearted comic book about a time-traveling family or Sun Ra using time travel as a musical device as revealed in the film *Space Is the Place*, time travel is a broadly accepted tool in most Afrofuturistic works.

But for Afrofuturists, the notion of bending time erases the prism of race-based limitations that all too often lace the present and define the recent past. "I think we feel held hostage to time," says D. Denenge Akpem, professor and artist. "There's this idea that if you can control time and your place in it, you can control the course of history and your own history. Afrofuturists create new visions. If you can create a new vision of the future, you can create a new vision of the past." Time travel also alleviates regret, she adds: "It's about empowerment; you're reshaping yourself, reshaping reality."

Parallel dimensions that can be channeled through music, desire, and thought are common themes among Afrofuturist artists. "A lot of people feel trapped in time and look at it as linear," says Rasheedah Phillips, founder of the AfroFuturist Affair, a nonprofit arts collective in Philadelphia. "They feel like they have no control over the future or the past. The main thing with me doing Afrofuturism is helping to look at time as a cycle and

use that and the past for change. How can I use those cycles in a way that is more powerful for me to change my future?"

Time-Warped Wonders

Jaycen Wise is one of the most popular African American characters in independent comics. He defies limitations of time and space with his gift of immortality. Wise, a scholar and warrior, is the "hero's hero" and the "last son of the African Empire of Kush." He must battle ignorance while preserving light and knowledge. He can be in a battle in ancient Egypt or rescuing prized diamonds in modern-day Manhattan; Wise has the ability to be anywhere. "I have a passion for developing cutting edge material that pushes the boundaries of the imagination," says Uraeus, the creator of Jaycen Wise, in the book *Black Comix*.[2]

One of the great dilemmas in the development of black characters in sci-fi is the question of handling race in the modern context. Time travel, immortality, reincarnation, and parallel universes create wormholes to supersede limitations of history while restoring power to both the narrative and its readers. The gaping hole of history and knowledge that Afrofuturism fills with fantasy and the multiverse embraces the greatest power a story can hold by reinstituting the ultimate hero's journey.

When Dr. Quantum was asked about the lessons of possible time travel and his scientific discoveries, he said, "The past is being created as much as the future. Once you get yourself into the position of creating the past, present, and future, rather than just being a victim of the past you become a magician."[3] Sun Ra would feel vindicated. He's not alone.

"Time is not linear," says graphic novelist Radi Lewis. "I think it folds in on itself. You can close your eyes and go back to a memory of when you're a kid; who's to say you're not going back in time?" Lewis wrote the graphic novel *Children of the Phoenix*. "I based it around my family, wife, and dog," says the New York native, who recently relocated to Arizona. Children of the Phoenix follows the Phoenix family, a reincarnated version of Adam and Eve who are deemed the protectors of their five children. "It sounds corny, but I kind of feel that way about my wife. I've known my wife since I was fourteen years old," says Lewis. They aren't immortal, says Lewis of his characters, but much like energy, "you can't destroy them, and they'll just reappear in another form. A secret race tracks the family down each incarnation and they sacrifice themselves for humanity."

A Time to Heal

No one wants to revisit the atrocities of slavery in the antebellum South. Forget the scariness of a dystopian future; the transatlantic slave trade is a reminder of where collective memories don't want to go, even if the trip is in their imagination. But Octavia Butler defied time-travel norms by sending her heroine into American slavery in her epic work *Kindred*. "The immediate effect of reading Octavia Butler's *Kindred* is to make every other time travel book in the world look as if it's wimping out," writes Jo Walton on Tor.com.[4]

Butler's character Dana leaves her comfy life in 1976 California and is transported to a slave plantation in 1815. She faces her ancestors, including a young boy with a slave mother and slave-master father. Survival is her greatest triumph.

Slavery is neither the utopian future nor an ancient far-removed past. The tragedy that split the nation into warring factions has effects that can be felt in the politics of the present. Slavery is feared. The historic hot potato, there is no romanticized imagery that makes for fictitious time-travel stories in the antebellum South that aren't emotional firestorms. Slavery is a stone's throw away from exploring death, and even death writhes with freedom.

One of the greatest achievements of Quentin Tarantino's 2012 film *Django Unchained*—a slave revenge story told as part spaghetti western, part romance, and part action film—was the fact that a Hollywood hero story where the black former slave wins could even be told in the antebellum South and be historically relevant, entertaining, and relatable. The film defied all conventions and was a critically acclaimed blockbuster. Butler's book *Kindred* was published in 1979—but only after being rejected by many publishers, most of whom didn't understand how a sci-fi novel could take place in such an uncomfortable time and have a black hero. Butler made her point, a declaration of humanity and social justice, and the result is a classic.

The book likely has inspired other slave-based time-travel tales. For example, the independent movie *Sankofa*, directed by Haile Gerima, follows Mona, a model who has a photo shoot at a Ghanian slave castle that held captured Africans before shipping them to the Americas. Mona is instantly transported through time, survives the Middle Passage, and becomes a slave who eventually aligns with a rebellious West Indian plotting to rebel. Both Dana and Mona, who had been relatively disengaged from social issues and history, return to their modern worlds with a greater understanding of their slave and African lineage.

Butler argued that *Kindred* wasn't technically sci-fi because Dana didn't use scientific means to travel. The same can be said of Mona in *Sankofa*, yet both Butler and Gerima used time travel as a tool to ingrain the realities of slave life and the ensuing sense of responsibility into their protagonists. They used time travel to encourage connections to a painful past.

"Reasons" circa Earth, Wind & Fire

Time travel is a fun way to free black characters from the restrictions of the times. But the time-travel element transcends storytelling and is a popular, albeit unidentified, practice taken up by musicians and theorists alike.

"As African Americans and blacks in the diaspora, we think cyclically," says musician Shawn Wallace. "We view time cyclically. We usually return to something in the past to interpret it. That's almost how we create our music; we go back to something and see how we can do it differently. Let's speed it up, let's slow it down." Wallace points to Maurice White of Earth, Wind & Fire and the band's use of the kalimba, sometimes called the African thumb piano. "He took a very simple instrument that opened him up rhythmically and it changed his music. We're always going back to go forward."

Almost reminiscent of Torah Midrash methods, a method of analyzing Hebrew text, Afrofuturists are constantly recontextualizing the past in a way that changes the present and the future. Sometimes seemingly distant occurrences are linked as an evolution of liberation consciousness. President Obama's election is recast as a manifestation of Dr. Martin Luther King's legacy. Hope

is a deep-rooted catchphrase anchored by President Obama that was echoed with as much fervor by Rev. Jesse Jackson and Dr. King before him. If you read passages by Malcolm X, Marcus Garvey, and Frederick Douglass, you'd think you're reading the same person. How are these voices linked, and how do they inform the future? Is the narrative stronger that the speakers themselves?

"We're constantly trying to figure out how we got here," says Wallace. "We are still grappling with how quickly our lives have changed as Americans and African Americans—how within my lifetime our family structure has so drastically shifted. I'm not saying one is better than another, I'm just noting a difference. Well, how did we get here, what music was the soundtrack? What theater were we into? What dances were we doing? What was our cultural output when we got to a certain point in our lives? Can we go back to that? I think, too, because of our particular experience in America, we're still piecing ourselves together and we're constantly going back to grab a piece as we move forward."

Photographer Alisha Wormsley is working on her Reverse Migration Project. She writes, "In the interest of time travel, I'm following the reverse order of my ancestral migration. It will go something like this: Pittsburgh—Appalachian Mountains—Virginia—North Carolina—South Carolina—Barbados—Cape (Slave) Coast, West Africa. Then I will make something."

Ancient to the Future

The continent of Africa frequently serves as the alpha and omega of motherlands, a cosmic metaphor for a utopian future and the past. It's evident in Afrofuturistic comic art, music, and literature.

The AACM's motto is "Ancient to the Future," and they work to play and teach the ancient musical healing traditions combined with the instruments of the past and today. "[Music] is a portal for time travel in a literal and figurative way," says Khari B., president of the AACM.

"For an African American who's never left America, Africa feels like the future," says musician Morgan Craft, who believes that great things will emerge from the continent. It's the reason you'll see graphic images of characters like Mshindo Kuumba's stunning illustration of Aniku, a mask-wearing, sword-wielding man with samurai leanings, or Demeke, a man in a golden cloak and African staff, and it's not clear whether they're images from the ancient African past or figures on a far-off planet in the future. "I think we as black artists are trying to come to grips with our epic past and what it could be again. The Garden of Eden of the future is in Africa," says Craft.

"It's that sankofa effect," says Khari B., referring to the Asante image of a bird that looks backward with the egg of the future on her back. He adds, "One step into the future while looking back. It's not that we're going backward, but we're evolving using the strength and characteristics of things that are why we're here today. We get to pull from our past to build our future. That's what Afrofuturism is about, going back to ancient traditions so that we can move more correctly into the future."

But the idea of time travel, oddly enough, also reemphasizes the present. "Not being able to literally fold time, how do we think about time travel in the present?" asks Stacey Robinson, artist and cocreator of the *Black Kirby* exhibit. "What do we do in the present?" he asks, adding that staying in the present tense

reemphasizes responsibility. Even the hypothetical time-travel concept still alters the present. He says, "I would approach time travel as an extension of the person traveling. How would time travel affect me?"

Robinson is correct. If today is future's past, what does that say about the present? Who are we in real time?

At heart, artists always hope to move their viewers. They hope their work gives some meaningful thought to ponder or at least shines a floodlight on matters ignored. And there are those who expect their radical fiction and flicks to be calls to action, spurring readers and viewers to change course, jump ship, or move with the techno beat of new times.

Controversial author Sam Greenlee likes to say that his only regret regarding his book *The Spook Who Sat by the Door*, a story about a black government agent who leads a revolution, is that he didn't do it himself. But artists like Greenlee aren't the norm. Most artists, fiction writers, etc., while having some intention for the viewer, are in a constant state of flux with the meteoric transference of ideas and how they blossom once they hit the main stage. I'm sure the *Star Trek* creators weren't thinking that by casting a black woman in their sci-fi series they would inspire the first black woman astronaut, although they knew it would somehow alter the face of race dynamics. I would guess that while Henry Dumas yearned to end inequality, he didn't know his short stories would birth a genre dubbed the Afro-surreal. What would an artist do if they knew audiences were hungry to use their work for real world social change?

"I was mind-blown by anyone who used art as real world planning," said N. K. Jemisin. "It can be helpful or inhibiting to know that someone is trying to use my work for real world application. It could fill me with horror, or I would become more conscious." Jemisin said she views activists as people who put their lives on the line; to know that her work could contribute to that is a larger-than-life responsibility almost too awesome to comprehend.

There are many activists who look to Afrofuturism and the canon of literature and theories as a platform for social change and the stoking of the imagination. Adrienne Maree Brown, Colleen Coleman, and Rasheedah Phillips are three women in three different urban communities, but they share a belief that triggering the imagination through tales about the future compels thinkers to break out of their circumstances.

An Imagination Rekindled

In 2011 I attended the Think Galacticon conference. Unlike the typical science fiction conference, the creators of Think Galacticon hoped to use science fiction as a platform for broader changes in society. Held at Chicago's Roosevelt University, the conference brought activists, science fiction writers, and fans together to share new perspectives on social change and privilege. Panels included talks on classism in fantasy novels (Why don't the paupers ever challenge the prince for power?), the growing black independent comic book scene, and personal growth tools for the revolution.

Both the panels and attendees were incredibly enthusiastic. A cross-cultural assemblage of radical activists and sci-fi fans, they were excited to attend the workshop and chat run by noted activist Adrienne Maree Brown.

"It's amazing to change the world, but it's heartbreaking, bone-cracking work, and you often don't see the change in real time," Brown says. "For me as an organizer, what gets me through has been immersing myself into these sci-fi worlds." She uses sci-fi to frame an inspirational perspective for youth that she works

with too. "Your life is science fiction," she's told them. "You are sci-fi, you are Luke Skywalker but way cooler; you're trans and black and you're surviving the world of Detroit."

Brown began her activism work in college. She is a former executive director of the Ruckus Society, a nonprofit that specializes in environmental activism and guerilla communication, and is heavily involved with the League of Pissed Off Voters. A Detroit resident, she describes herself as an organizational healer, pleasure activist, and artist and is "obsessed" with learning and developing models for action and community transformation.

But she's also a sci-fi fan. After discovering Octavia Butler's work, she was inspired to develop new work of her own. Brown is using Butler's pivotal series *The Parables* and its postapocalyptic tale of discovery as a template for change agency in desperate communities. Her workshop at Think Galacticon was titled "Octavia Butler and Emergent Strategies." And the workshop description read as follows:

> "All that you touch, you change. All that you change, changes you. The only lasting truth is change. God is change." These words of Octavia Butler's have impacted people very seriously on a personal level—but how do we apply her wisdom on a political organizing level? How do we approach the strategic planning we're all supposed to do if we accept, and come to love, the emergent power of changing conditions? This session will be half popular organizational development training, half inquiry into what the future of organizational development and strategic planning will look like.

As far as Brown is concerned, many abandoned urban communities are postapocalyptic in nature. Such places are rife for community-born transformation. "If you look at cities in the US right now, there are cities or communities in apocalyptic situations," says Brown. She references challenged areas in New York City, New Orleans in the aftermath of Katrina, Cincinnati, and her new home, Detroit. "Detroit used to be this booming industry town. This used to be a big, booming factory town. You could make a living here, probably a better living if you were a black person than most other places. Now there's seven hundred thousand living in the city proper. That's a huge shift."

When Brown first arrived, her first impression was that Detroit was in a postapocalyptic state. The town felt as if it had been abandoned, she said. But slowly she recognized the supports and humanity. "It made me look at other cities [with blighted communities] differently. There are people living in places that we associate with the end of the world, but it's not the end of the world, it's the beginning of something else. An economy based on relationships and not the monetary value you can place on someone else."

In fact, Brown now teaches activists how to use strategies from Butler's books to build communities in areas where resources are scarce. She presented a workshop on her strategies at the conference. Such strategies include community farming, building relationships with neighbors, and essential survival skills.

She emphasizes that people in troubled areas need to have self-determination over their food supply. She says, "In *The Parables* Butler talks about the Acorn communities—it's an intentional community, a place where people come in an intentional

way to build a life together. They are farming and they have some accountability to one another. They have a spiritual community. I feel that is one strategy that's laid out as one of the ways to survive a future where our resources are unsure."

She adds, "Another is door-to-door relationship building that is nonjudgmental. After the Acorn community is trashed, instead of the main character feeling smashed, she goes door-to-door and starts to build a community of believers who are not rooted in one place, but rooted in a shared ideology. It's very similar to the Zapatista ideology. They went around for ten years building relationships one by one. Now a lot of organizing is done around the Internet and tweeting each other. If we weren't able to do that, what would we do? We would work with whoever is there with us."

She's also a big advocate of teaching essential survival skills that are necessary in postapocalyptic circumstances, including gardening, basic care for the sick and wounded, and serving as a midwife. "I'm also looking at building homes and bathrooms. How do you make a bathroom where there is none?" she asks.

While some might challenge the apocalyptic comparison, Brown argues that her main point is to generate solutions. "We shouldn't spend the majority of our time trying to get someone else to be accountable for what happens to our communities," she says. "What I like about Octavia is that there are so many people working outside of the system in her works. She says, 'Don't wait for someone to do it for you; you provide the solutions yourself.' That apocalyptic situation is not something that someone else is going to get you out of; you have to lift yourself out of that."

However, Brown has also found that the creation of science fiction by fellow activists is also a great way to keep activists

and advocates motivated. "An activist can work on an issue, and the result won't come until after their lifetime," says Brown. She adds that the work, while rewarding, can sometimes feel never-ending. Exploring the future through science fiction can be a great support and healing tool, she says. In fact, she's currently gathering works of science fiction from activists for a collection.

"What is the biggest story we can imagine telling ourselves and say about our future?" Brown posed to her colleagues. "It can be a utopia, a dystopia, but we wanted to get a perspective from people who are actually trying to change the world today. I'm really curious, what do they think will happen? What do they think is the best-case scenario? How do we get people to think of themselves as creators of tomorrow's story?

Imagine a World

One year, while teaching art to a group of students in a troubled inner-city area, Colleen Coleman wanted to discuss a made-for-TV film that had aired the night before. She felt the film, an apocalyptic tale where only a few suburbanites survived, would stimulate an interesting discussion about survival and fortitude. To her surprise, the students resolved that if such a horror occurred, they would probably perish. She says, "I remember kids coming into the school saying, 'We're just going to die. It's just going to be over.' There was this certain apathy. They felt they had no control."

It's a sentiment she felt intensified after 9/11 and is only complicated by the proliferation of drugs in many communities and returning soldiers and families who are wrestling with PTSD. However, Coleman, a recent graduate of the School of the Art

Institute of Chicago, did her thesis on Afrofuturism. She believes that Afrofuturism can stimulate the imagination and give many kids the confidence to hope and expect more.

"Afrofuturism allows you to play," she says. Coleman was one of several teaching artists who worked with elementary and high school students to create art using Afrofuturism at the Museum of Contemporary African Diasporan Arts (MoCADA) in Brooklyn. Coleman found that many of her students over the years weren't in touch with their imaginations. She says, "There's a lack of creativity being germinated, and it has to do with being taught to the test. Teachers don't have time to introduce young people to their imagination."

Coleman is now one of the teaching artists at the MoCADA, which is known for innovative workshops and exhibits. For the past twelve years, they have hosted a culminating art exhibit for the Artists-in-Schools Program, their twenty-to-thirty-week arts partnership with public schools in the neighborhood. They typically work with seven schools a year. "Most of our students' schools don't have art programs," says Ruby Amanze, MoCADA director of education. The theme of the culminating art show changes from year to year, and the 2012 theme was a new one for the museum and the students: Afrofuturism.

The children were asked to visualize the future and to create collective art projects. One group of students created a large door symbolizing a passageway into the future. Another used photography to depict how they wanted to be remembered in the future. Others recreated what black music would sound like. While the artwork was intriguing, the processes that led to the creation of the work were incredible. "Although it's a visual art program, 80

percent of the focus includes a historical focus," says Amanze. She adds, "At one school the teacher asked the boys how they would feel if the girls told their history and wrote out the boys. The boys were really upset at the thought of it." But the discussion compelled many of the children to give some serious thought to the future, their connection to the future now, and the impact of the past.

"I use Afrofuturism to get students to talk about their future," says Coleman. "[Many] have a difficult time seeing a future. For some reason, the future is a blur, as if they live in the land where time stands still." But she stimulates their minds. "I ask them why companies are building space stations. I ask them about the idea of people being intergalactic tourists and who will be able to afford it," she says. "We talk about running out of water. I think they understand that there are dire issues that we have to address in the world. I'm hoping that by having these conversations, they will begin to think about what they can do for themselves as individuals and collectively how they can build a new society. I think it can open up a lot of possibilities."

Reawakening and Prisons

Rasheedah Phillips launched the AfroFuturist Affair in 2011. A member of the Black Science Fiction Society, she wanted to create a community of artists in Philadelphia who could gather and share their work. The event began as an open-mic featuring writers and poets but soon evolved into a larger community of shared interests. Phillips hosted a charity and costume ball as well as an Afrofuturism lecture featuring women performance artists.

When I spoke with her, she had just completed a workshop with recently released inmates who were in a work-reentry program.

"It was amazing," she says. "Part of my mission is to spread the word about what Afrofuturism is beyond groups of intellectuals. I wanted to introduce this to people who might not have access to this audience." Phillips won a micro-grant for the AfroFuturist Affair and, while presenting at the awards dinner, was asked to share her work at a reentry program. The participants in the reentry program ranged from their mid-twenties to late fifties. Most were men, a few were women. Most were black.

"I opened the workshop by asking them what was their favorite sci-fi-themed book or TV show," says Phillips. "I asked them to tell me in one sentence how they saw their future or what they thought would happen a hundred years from now." Then she talked about racism in science fiction and how they felt about not seeing their image in media. "They were so into it," she says. "They really schooled me, and in terms of breaking down core concepts, they were on top of it."

Next Phillips talked about breaking cycles and looking to the past and present to identify patterns that no longer worked in their life. She used the metaphor of a time machine and asked what they would change in their life. "They really connected with that aspect," she says. "They really liked discussing their past and how to change the patterns and cycles and work to build a future."