AFRICAN AMERICAN / SOCIOLOGY / SCI FI

ople and the
sha Womack
she explains
things in the
a vast and
ung progres-

"A
th
it
pr
put it down."

—**JARVIS SHEFFIELD**, creator of the Black Science Fiction Society

"When I coined the term Afrofuturism in 1992, who knew young cultural critics like Ytasha Womack would make it their own? Accessibly written, with an emphasis on the politics of the here and now, *Afrofuturism* beckons us through an intellectual wormhole, into a universe where dark matter is, at last, visible." —**MARK DERY**, cultural critic, author, lecturer

"This book is the gravity that holds the universe of ideas that define Afrofuturism. Finally, the starting point for our welcomed explorers."

—**KING BRITT**, universal sonic architect

In this hip, accessible primer to the music, literature, and art of Afrofuturism, author Ytasha Womack introduces readers to the burgeoning community of artists creating Afrofuturist works, the innovators from the past, and the wide range of subjects they explore. From the sci-fi literature of Samuel Delany, Octavia Butler, and N. K. Jemisin to the musical cosmos of Sun Ra, George Clinton, and the Black Eyed Peas' will.i.am, to the visual and multimedia artists inspired by African Dogon myths and Egyptian deities, the book's topics range from the "alien" experience of blacks in America to the "
and activism. With
strive to break dow
free individuals to

Afrofuturism

978-1-61374-796-4

Lawrence

www.lawrencehillb

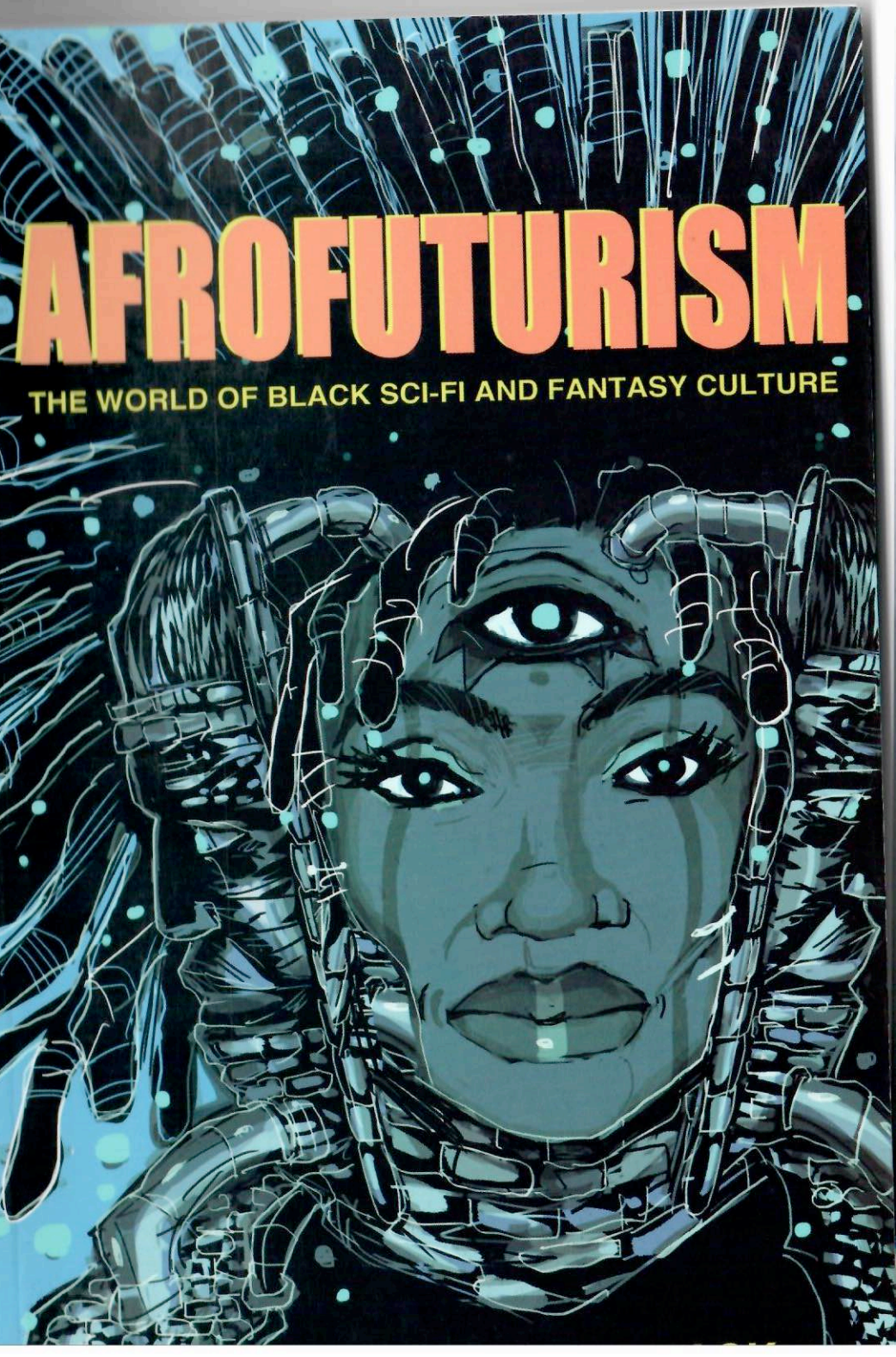
WOMACK

AFROFUTURISM

Lawrence Hill

AFROFUTURISM

THE WORLD OF BLACK SCI-FI AND FANTASY CULTURE



AFROFUTURISM

THE WORLD OF BLACK SCI-FI AND FANTASY CULTURE

YTASHA L. WOMACK

Lawrence Hill Books
Chicago

First edition
Published by Lawrence Hill Books, an imprint of
Chicago Review Press, Incorporated
814 North Franklin Street
Chicago, Illinois 60610
ISBN 978-1-61374-796-4

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Womack, Ytasha.
Afrofuturism : the world of black sci-fi and fantasy culture / Ytasha L. Womack. — First edition.
pages cm
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 978-1-61374-796-4 (trade paper)
1. Science fiction—Social aspects. 2. African Americans—Race identity. 3. Science fiction films—Influence. 4. Futurologists. 5. African diaspora—Social conditions. I. Title.
PN3433.5.W66 2013
809.3'8762093529—dc23

2013025755

Cover art and design: "Ioe Ostara" by John Jennings
Cover layout: Jonathan Hahn
Interior design: PerfecType, Nashville, TN
Interior art: John Jennings and James Marshall (p. 187)

Printed in the United States of America
5 4 3 2 1

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

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

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.

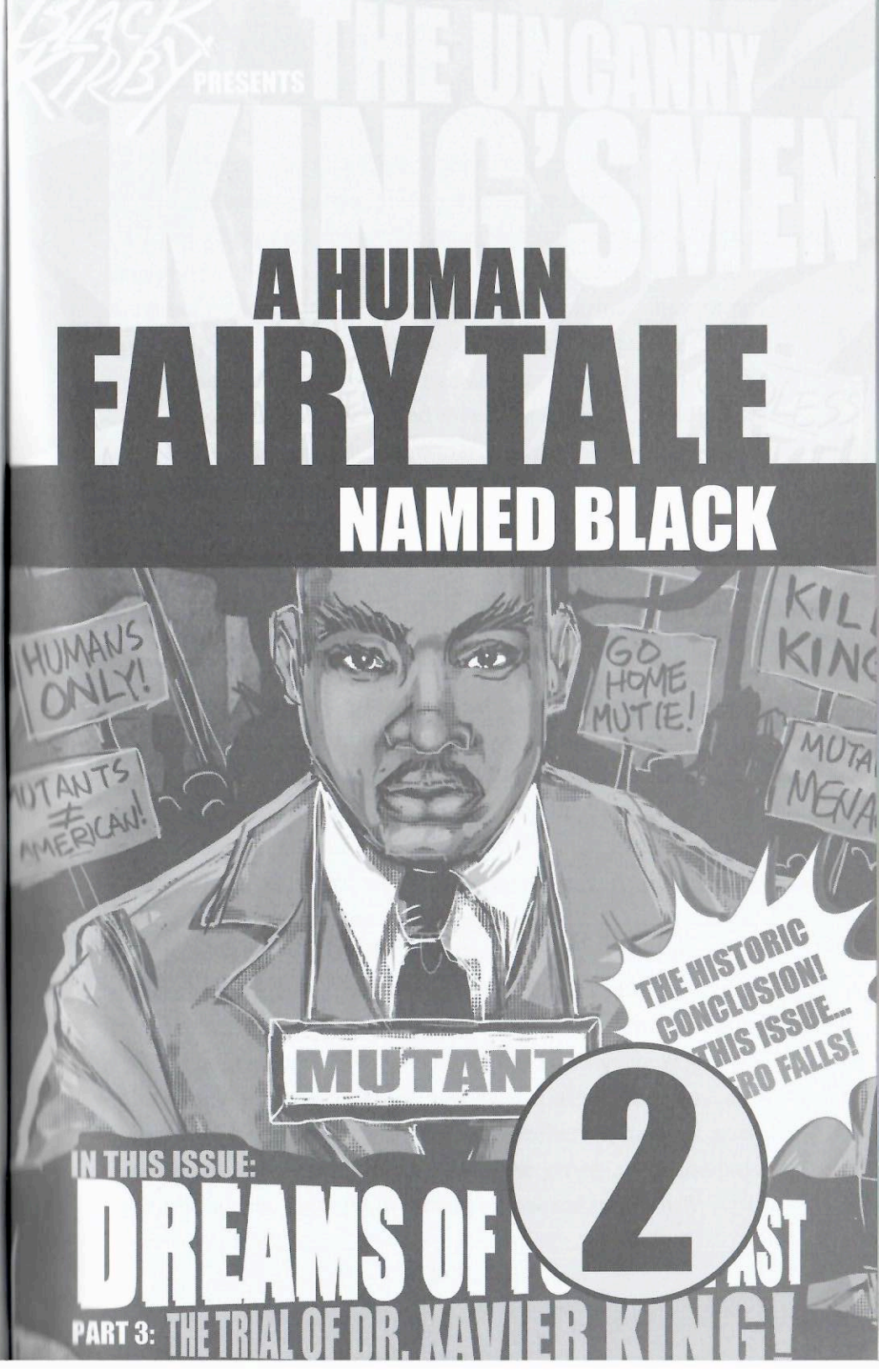
The name Afrofuturism itself toiled largely in academic and arts circles, specifically those circles that were engaged in the conversation. Even today many people creating Afrofuturistic

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.



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

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

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

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

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

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

The whole contemplation ripped the lid off a Pandora's box of questions for me. What decisions do we make because of the limitations or expectations we associate with race? If we cast off those limitations, how would our social lives change? Would we have the same friendships? Live in the same neighborhoods? Go to the same schools? I'd pose these questions to audiences, and it was a daunting thought. Outer obstacles aside, what role have we played in limiting our own lives based on race? This

contemplation ultimately led to the *Rayla 2212* series. I wanted to write about a world of people of color where race as we know it today was not a factor. But I also wanted the challenge of writing about people of color without using today's ethnic cultures as an identity or backdrop while still denoting the value of the cultures in their past and our present. It was a very Afrofuturistic experiment. For that, I had to take my story to space.

The Birth of the Post-Human

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

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

What Does It Mean to Be Human?

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

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

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

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

What does it mean to be nonhuman? As a nonhuman, your life is not valued. You are an "alien," "foreign," "exotic," "savage"—a wild one to be conquered or a nuisance to be destroyed. Your bodies are not your own, fit for probing and research. You have no history of value. You are incapable of creating culture in general,

but when you do, it is from an impulse or emotion, never intellect. Humans, well meaning or otherwise, can't relate to a nonhuman.

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

The greater part of the civil rights movement in the United States, as well as self-rule movements in precolonial India, the Caribbean, and on the African continent, were efforts to ensure equal rights for all. And this struggle paralleled equal efforts to prove that people of color, women, LGBTQ people, the working class, and others were in fact human.

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

However, this notion of otherness prevails.

The Other Side of the Rainbow

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

of technology. In the Western world, improvisation is a failure; you do it when something goes wrong. But when black people improvise it's a form of mastery."

In Reynaldo Anderson's essay "Cultural Studies or Critical Afrofuturism: A Case Study in Visual Rhetoric, Sequential Art, and Post-Apocalyptic Black Identity," he talks about the notion of twinness as a form of resistance that pulled on Africanisms but also was uniquely formulated for survival. This survival took place in postapocalyptic times, with the transatlantic slave trade being the apocalypse, he says. Noting that African slaves came from societies in which women and men had equal governing power, Anderson says that "to be a human being an individual should possess both masculine and feminine principles (protector-nurturer) in order to have a healthy community." This twinness, he adds, was a survival mechanism "that enabled [women] to psychologically shield themselves and their inner lives." However, he also says that rhetorical strategies include signifying, call-and-response, narrative sequencing, tonal semantics, technological rhetoric, agitation, nationalism, jeremiads, nommo, Africana womanist or black feminist epistemologies, queer studies, time and space, visual rhetoric, and culture as modes of resistance.[6] But the point of this alien and postapocalyptic metaphor, says Anderson, isn't to get lost in traumas of the past or present-day alienation. The alien framework is a framework for understanding and healing.

It's the reason that D. Denenge Akpem teaches an Afrofuturism class as a pathway to liberation. "The basic premise of this course is that the creative ability to manifest action and transformation has been essential to the survival of Blacks in the Diaspora," she says.

The liberation edict in Afrofuturism provides a prism for evolution.

3

PROJECT IMAGINATION

Can you imagine a world without the idea of race? Can you imagine a world where skin color, hair texture, national origin, and ethnicity are not determinants of power, class, beauty, or access?

Some don't want to imagine it; others are highly invested in the impossibility of it all. But let's just talk about those who crave an end to injustice. Can these well-wishers see it? What does this world look like? What does it feel like? If you can't see it, how do you know when you've achieved it?

The ideal society that the nameless many have fought and died for is a world that many can't imagine. Even those who live the dreams of their predecessors wrestle with leaving familiar notions of identity behind and imagining something new. "There's something about racism that has produced a fatalism that has impacted futuristic thinking," says professor and author Alondra Nelson. While statements like "We don't know what tomorrow will bring" and "The future is not promised" are often said under the guise of well-meaning advice, they have a deeper reach into black diaspora culture, says Nelson. They're countered by the concept of prophecy, she says, or speaking about hope to create a vision for the future. "It's about future thinking, sustainability and imagination."

The imagination is powerful. The narrative of hope that spews from change agents working for social equality is no accident. Dr. Martin Luther King, Rev. Jesse Jackson Sr., even President Barack Obama centered their missions and speeches on hope. On the surface, hope rings as very altruistic—something simple that anyone can do if they just reshuffle their thinking caps or wish upon a star. But the results of a changed mind backed by a bit of empowerment can turn a conflicted world on its head.

Hope, much like imagination, comes at a premium. The cost is a life where more is expected. Where more is expected, new actions are required. The audacity of hope, the bold declaration to believe, and clarity of vision for a better life and world are the seeds to personal growth, revolutionized societies, and life-changing technologies. Desire, hope, and imagination are the cornerstones of social change and the first targets for those who fight against it. "You can't go forward with cynicism—cynicism being disbelief," says Jackson, whose catchphrase "Keep hope alive" may be one of the most popular quotes in modern history. "You have to hope against the odds and not go backwards by fear. Dr. King, Chavez, Gandhi were people who removed people from low places and had the hope," Jackson says.

Imagination, hope, and the expectation for transformative change is a through line that undergirds most Afrofuturistic art, literature, music, and criticism. It is the collective weighted belief that anchors the aesthetic. It is the prism through which some create their way of life. It's a view of the world.

Where there is no vision, the people perish.

Mind Shifting

Taking on this idea of race as a technology sparked new ideas in me. A deliberate by-product of the transatlantic slave trade enforced by violence and law, race (i.e., the division of white and black and the power imbalances based on skin color) simply didn't exist prior to five hundred years ago. I share this in my talks, and I can see the churning of old thoughts and flickers of new ones when audiences begin to see race as a man-made creation.

As a writer who tends to position everything in a cultural context, I was challenged by writing Rayla Illmatic, a character in a completely different world. I wrestled with how to describe characters physically and how to explain their family histories. If your great-grandmother came to a new planet from America, does its history have any context several billion miles away? This stretched my imagination, and this exercise in transcending familiar boundaries is an experience that Afrofuturists seek and encourage. Artist and professor D. Denenge Akpem, an acclaimed ritual-based artist, argues that the artistic process of Afrofuturism itself facilitates personal growth.

Dr. William "Sandy" Darity, a professor of African American history at Duke University, follows me on Twitter. He's a *Rayla* fan, and when he assembled a panel for the Transcending Race conference at Ohio State University, he asked if I would present my ideas on race, based on the *Rayla 2212* project, and predict how it would play out in the far-off future. Others on the panel, including Darity, presented other "what-if" race scenarios, including the impact of a college faculty that reflected the diversity in the country and the impact of a job guarantee on racial inequities. What began as a sci-fi-inspired challenge quickly morphed into a very real issue.

If a new society were created beyond Earth's stratosphere, who would populate it? Would those nations with space programs be the only ones with access to travel to the new world? Is access dependent on the ability to pay for a space flight? With the prospects of commercial endeavors, who has jurisdiction in a dispute? If the colonization of new lands on Earth were any indication, colonization beyond Earth could spur a host of issues.

I presented in spring 2012, the same time that several private companies, including Virgin Galactic, announced their space-tourism ticket sales to the public and a few days shy of the first commercial space flight to the International Space Center. Later, Darity, who is also a sci-fi fan, created the first Race and Space conference to begin in fall 2013 and asked me to join him in launching it. Our initial work in launching the conference came at the same time that former astronaut Mae Jemison, the first black woman to go into space, announced that she'd won a federal grant for the 100 Year Starship project, which is devoted to spurring the necessary technological and social innovations to travel to distant stars. We asked her to be our guest speaker. From creating self-sustaining energy sources to traveling as "DNA slush," the Starship project would leave no stone unturned in the path beyond our solar system. The scientific advancements likely would change new inventions for Earth as well. But the psychological impact of space travel was just as important as the requisite tech savvy. "It'd be unfortunate if the crew didn't make it because they couldn't get along with each other," Jemison said.[1]

Analyzing race as a technology morphed into both an imaginative playground for writing for me but also a very practical tool for real-world space-colonization issues that readers connected with. Just as the actions in the present dictate the future, imagining the future can change the present.

Reenvisioning the Past

The first time I attended a traveling black inventors exhibit, I was awestruck. The "Black Inventions Museum" exhibit was

hosted by the DuSable Museum of African American History in Chicago's Washington Park, which, a century prior, was where Cornelius Coffey and John C. Robinson tested their homemade airplane during the first half of the twentieth century. It is also the park Sun Ra frequented when he distributed his self-published inspirational handouts on race, space, and metaphysics while formulating his ideas on the power of music. Nevertheless, my surprise wasn't that black inventors existed. I was familiar with quite a few of their inventions, or so I thought: the traffic light, the refrigerator, the blood bank, the ironing board, the modern-day computer (a frequent jaw-dropper), the Super Soaker, the lawnmower. I'd heard about those before. The shock was the sheer volume of inventions, how they span every aspect of daily life, and their impact on the science world. I didn't know about the space shuttle.

I didn't know that Kenneth Dunkley invented the 3-D glasses I wear at every big-budget blockbuster or that Dr. Philip Emeagwali invented the world's fastest computer. Dr. Shirley Jackson is credited with inventing and contributing to some of the major telecommunications developments of our time, including making advances in the portable fax, touch-tone telephone, solar cells, fiber-optic cables, caller ID, and call waiting—all while she worked at Bell Laboratories. Every time I reach for my smartphone, I have Dr. Jackson to thank.

The list seemed endless. If it's ever in your town, please go see the show.

But the show was so all consuming, even the casual visitor had to wonder, "Is there anything a black man or woman didn't invent?" (Of course there is, but that goes to show how extensive

inspiring young people to lead a life without limits placed on their potential and to pursue collaboration between humanity and technology," will.i.am said. He hoped that the song would transcend time and culture.

A longtime science lover, will.i.am advocates for STEM Centers, interdisciplinary schools focused on science, technology, engineering, and math, and he's on a mission to inspire children to recognize the technologies around them and use creativity, science, and art to change their environment. "Science and technology [are] already a part of popular culture," will.i.am told a reporter shortly after the broadcast. "The world of STEM hasn't found a way to remind people that iPod and iPad and all the code that makes Twitter and Facebook work all comes from people who have an education around STEM," he said.

"I don't want my neighborhood to continue to be the way it was twenty years from now," he said. "All it takes is one kid, one kid from Boyle Heights, to be Mark Zuckerberg, and my neighborhood's changed forever."[2]

But will.i.am isn't the only musician working with NASA. CopperWire, an Ethiopian hip-hop group tapped the nation's scientists to collect sonified light curves, or sounds from stars, that they're mixing in their new app. In April 2012 the group debuted their album *Earthbound*. Raising funds on Kickstarter, a popular crowdsourcing site, the group's accompanying app will also include an augmented reality space-flight game, an interactive art widget and comic book, unreleased songs, artwork, and playable instruments.

"The idea of making music from a galactic perspective gives you the opportunity to make up an entire world for sound to exist in," says Burntface, the CopperWire member who's also the 3-D

modeler and graphic designer behind the group's Phone Home remix Android app.[3] The app's algorithms can generate two million variations of the song based on any ten-digit phone number.

Soundtrack to the Future

Afrofuturists value universal love, reinterpret sound and technology, and echo beauties of a lost past as the essence of a harmonious future. While the music is full of mind-benders, with the new era of technology, sounds can literally go beyond the stratosphere. Always ahead of the curve, Afrofuturist music embodies the times while literally sounding out of this world. Listen to Sun Ra's "Astro Black," Lee Scratch Perry's "Disco Devil," Brides of Funkenstein's "Mother May I?," an X-ecutioners live DJ show, "Drexciya's 2 Hour Mix—Return to Bubble Metropolis" by VLR, and "Dance of the Pseudo Nymph" by Flying Lotus and you too might feel like you've been sailing on a black ark from a distant star.

But the music is about more than good vibes. Physicist and musician Stephon Alexander revealed in a TED talk that jazz legend John Coltrane's song "Giant Steps" was an aural and physical diagram of Einstein's Theory of Relativity. Alexander stumbled upon a diagram by Coltrane and realized it plotted out geometrical theories of quantum gravity and matched the notes and chord changes in the song. The discovery sparked other research on the parallels between music and quantum physics, and Alexander and his team learned that the Western scale of music also resembles the double helix of DNA.

"It's outrageous," says James Haile, philosopher and organizer of the 2013 Black Existentialism Conference held at Duquesne

University. Haile watched Alexander's talk and was floored by the links between music and quantum theory. "It might be the most fascinating thing I've ever heard," he said. "I had an idea that's what was going on, but to have a trained physicist prove that shows it's more than a notion." What do such discoveries mean for Afrofuturists? "It shows how we can incorporate particle physics into Afrofuturism and coordinate ideas three dimensionally," says Haile. As for the world at large, the discovery gives new depth to the power of music.

"Afrofuturistic music is music that pushes beyond the norms and standards of our current culture," says Leon Q. Allen, composer and trumpet player. Leon Q. fuses Latin jazz and house music to create futuristic expressions of both. He contributed to the *Rayla 2212* soundtrack and is also a member of the legendary AACM, a world-renowned avant-garde collective inspired by Sun Ra that emphasizes sonic healing. "It's the 'what next' factor," Leon says of Afrofuturist music. "It's music that's moving forward to a new place of cultural significance."

Afrofuturism is the only future-oriented aesthetic that has such a rich history in music. George Clinton, Sun Ra, Bootsy Collins, Jimi Hendrix, Lee Scratch Perry, Grace Jones, LaBelle, Outkast, Erykah Badu, Janelle Monáe, X-ecutioners, funk, dub, turntablism, soundclash, Detroit techno, Chicago house, even Coltrane and Miles Davis, have all been framed in an Afrofuturistic context—music that shifted the edge. Whether through lyrics of inspiration, new technologies in music, or shock-and-awe performances, the idea of music and in some cases black identity and gender identity evolved. "The approach is not limited to a certain style of music, the approach is based on the desire," says Leon Q. "People have to

study what's going on in the society and the culture and look at the trends and patterns for what's going on at the time."

The desire to be more, to be free of the constrictions of a society with marked color distinctions and separation is like pixie dust sprinkled throughout the tracks. The music echoes with a universalism rhythmically that emanates from the roots of African music but is jet-fueled into the future. There are no barriers in Afrofuturist music, no entity that can't emit a rhythmic sound, no arrangements to adhere to, no locked-in structures about chorus and verse. Wordplay is keen.

The standards are high. "When you line up everything that has come before you—if you line up Muddy Waters, Jimi Hendrix, Miles Davis, all the way up to now and imagine yourself standing in front of them—are you contributing something that is equal in weight?" asks Morgan Craft, an electric guitarist who has played with Meshell Ndegeocello, among others. "You have to push something that is equal to what the masters have pushed before you. If you don't hold yourself up to their standard, it's a waste of time."

However, if there's a cosmic ground floor for the existence of Afrofuturism in music, Sun Ra and George Clinton would be that foundation. The idea of a song mythology from the cosmos, high-flying African-inspired space costumes, wordplay that challenged logic, and the use of traditional and electronic instruments to redefine sounds and push for universal love were established by Sun Ra and George Clinton. Both are referenced more than any other artist as the inspiration for today's Afrofuturists. Clinton, whose funk sounds came to the forefront in the 1970s, later spoke of being inspired by Sun Ra, who began creating sonar sounds for the space age in the '50s.

While many Afrofuturist artists have donned the space gear and metallic pants of the musical space cadet, in the case of those artists dubbed as Afrofuturist innovators, the space theme was more than just a kooky gimmick to play off the space age, more than an eyebrow-raising marketing ploy. The colorful, albeit shiny, costumes served as a visual tool to stimulate higher thinking and to prepare audiences for something new.

In other cases, the costuming wasn't a focal point at all. Creative uses of technological innovations to create reigned queen. The wordplay, the heights of irony and dissonance, compelled listeners to question their take on reality. "What I appreciated about Parliament, Funkadelic, and Sun Ra is that they were almost speaking in code. Almost like the old Negro spirituals, we're going to talk about three things in this one line, and you almost have to be in the club to understand," says Shawn Wallace, composer and arranger, noting that the best in hip-hop lyricism uses the same layered language.

Afrofuturists enjoy challenging their listeners on their path to enlightenment. They enjoy pulling the rug out from under the smugness of reality. Whether it's through chord arrangements, oddity, or sheer boldness, they get a kick out of tossing their listeners into the far reaches of outer space.

The Trifecta: Sun Ra, George Clinton, and Lee Scratch Perry

When Sun Ra, born Herman Poole Blount, left Birmingham, Alabama, for Chicago in the late 1940s, he was already a well-respected jazz musician with extraordinary talents. But his

affection for electronic music and predictions that man would one day land on the moon made him stand apart. "He was very well read," said Arthur Hoyle, renowned jazz artist who played with Sun Ra in the late '50s. In a time when Chicago's South Side was littered with jazz bands and clubs, Sun Ra was a fixture on the scene. Before he adopted the flashlights, solar helmets, and sci-fi African garb that would come to be his trademark, he was known as one of the most scholarly musicians around and would frequently hand out literature about his theories in Washington Park. His canon of must-reads included books on theosophy, numerology, metaphysics, science fiction, biblical studies, and a glut of underground alternative history books and African history books. He was propelled to answer what others hadn't questioned and gravitated to books with theories on the origins of the world that differed from the Eurocentric lessons propagated in media and schools.

Sun Ra wanted to use music to heal. He had a preacher-like conversion moment. Part spiritual revelation, part self-described alien encounter, Sun Ra believed he came to the world to heal. This quest to fill the knowledge gaps, to find the erased contributions of people of color, and to ultimately shatter the color/class divides resulted in an information trek that would last for much of his life. And this searching for more, this desire to know the answers that weren't readily available in the classics and media of the time, was the impetus for his stretch in music. Although he was adept at playing the big band and bebop that defined jazz in the 1950s and early '60s, he did not want to be limited by its form. He named himself Sun Ra after the Egyptian sun deity and claimed he was from Saturn.

"It's an art form you can't see. It's aural. It's sonic. If it's sonic and emotional, can't you take any sound and get it to speak? Instead of playing the guitar like Jimi, you take a bread knife and take it up and down a string, put it on a floor and step on it. You can make all these crazy sounds, but can you get them to communicate? The challenge for futuristic invention is to get new sounds to communicate."

Androids Rising

Janelle Monáe is a modern-day musical paradox. Sporting a coiffed 1950s pompadour and snug tuxedo, the Kansas-born singer's futuristic sound is rich with romance-craving droids and time travel. She was discovered by Outkast's Big Boi, another Afrofuturistic point person, who introduced her to Bad Boy Records' Sean Combs, arguably hip-hop's greatest marketer. Monáe's music, look, and frenetic dance channel James Brown, *Stankonia*, big-band-era Duke Ellington, and the best in uplifting sonic sound. Her shock-and-awe demeanor and masculine façade are a visual shout-out to Grace Jones. Her powerful vocals evoke memories of jazz greats.

Her music has a story.

Monáe's alter ego, Cindi Mayweather, is a silver metallic-dipped android sent to "free the citizens of Metropolis from the Great Divide," a secret society using time travel to suppress freedom and love throughout the ages. When the ArchAndroid returns, the android community will be free. The space saga includes love, revolution, and heroism, complete with an android uprising, freedom fights, and ultimate peace.

Metropolis combines such a wide array of time periods, sounds, layers, and intrigue that it feels like audio time travel. Even the music's mythology has a mythology. Monáe likes to say that her tunes are created at the "Palace of Dogs," a place that cannot be spoken of.

Monáe, too, uses traditional orchestra instruments courtesy of the Wondaland ArchOrchestra as well as kinetic computer-generated beats.

Just in case the purpose of these hyperlayered metaphors and musical arrangements goes over your head, Monáe distributes the Ten Droid Commandments at her concert. Written like P-Funk hyperbole, the commandments instruct attendees on how to experience the music.

> Commandment 4: "Please be aware that the songs you will hear are electric: be careful as you experience them and interact with electrical devices, drink water or touch others. The Wondaland Arts Society will not be held responsible for melted telecommunications devices or injuries resulting from lockback, sweat-tech, leaveweave, poparm, shockjaw, electrobutt, or any other maladies or malfunctions caused by the jam."
>
> Commandment 6: "Abandon your expectations about art, race, gender, culture and gravity."
>
> Commandment 7: "Before the show, feel free to walk about the premises impersonating one of the many inspirations of the ArchanDroid Emotion Picture: (Choose One) Salvador Dali, Walt Disney, Outkast, Stevie Wonder, Octavia Butler, David Bowie, Andy Warhol or John Williams."

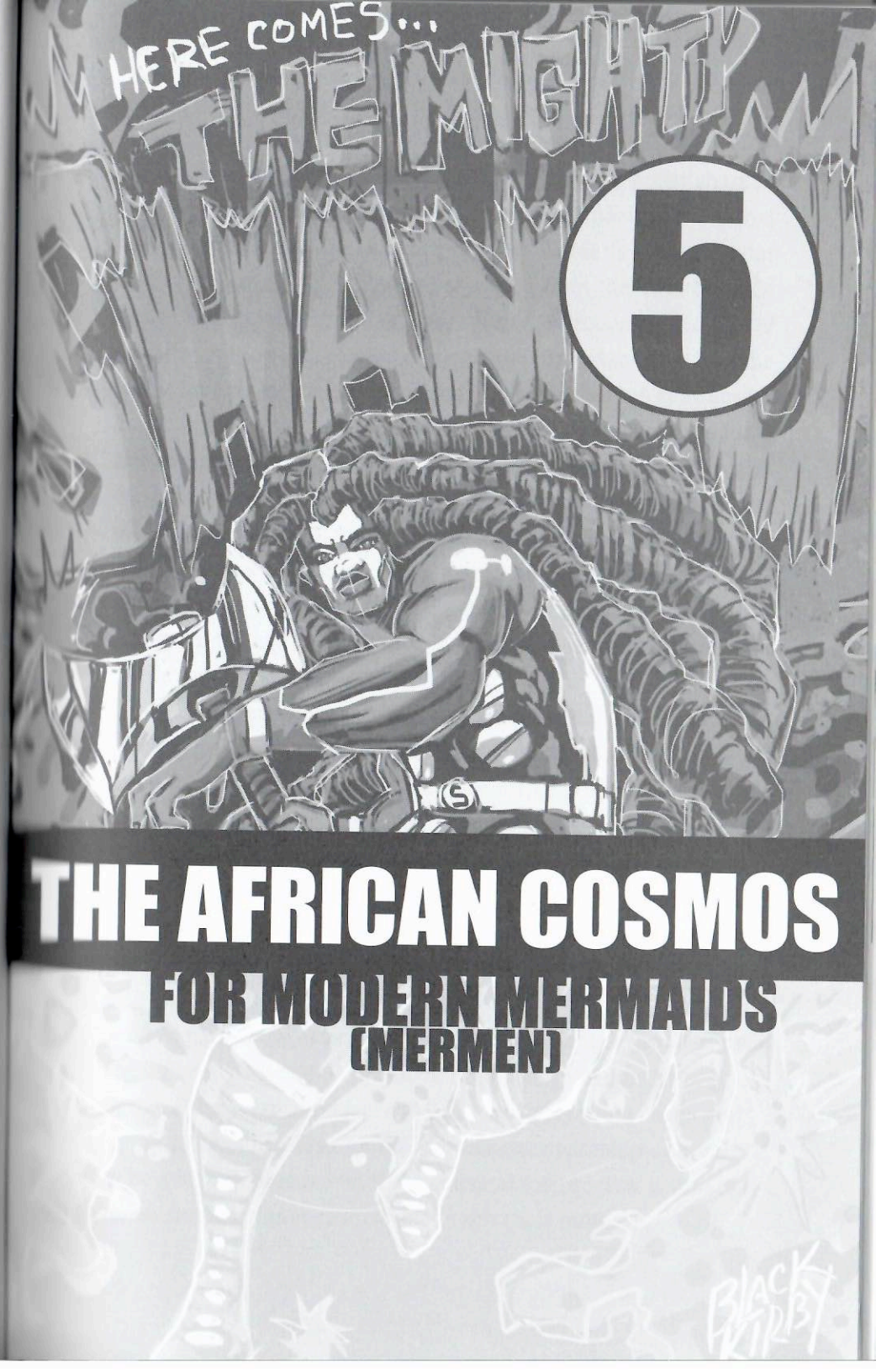
> Commandment 9: "By shows end you must transform. This includes, but is not limited to, eye colour, perspective, mood or height."[8]

Like her Afrofuturistic brethren before her, including Sun Ra who donned a flashlight or cosmic crown, and George Clinton's multicolored hair and space suit, Monáe is rarely, if ever, seen without her starched shirt, pompadour, and classic shrunken tux. At the 2012 Black Girls Rock! Awards, she said her costume was an ode to her working-class parents, who wore uniforms too.

The song "Q.U.E.E.N" from the *Electric Lady* album includes fellow Afrofuturist Erykah Badu. In the video, the two are suspended in animation in a future's past museum exhibit on rebels who used music as a freedom movement. The song, a funk throwback, is an ode to the eccentric, independent ladies of the world who are labeled as freaks for being themselves.

Monáe has an ArchOrchestra; Sun Ra had an Arkestra. Sun Ra came from Saturn to teach earthlings how to love; Cindi Mayweather must return to free her robotic counterparts. Sun Ra juggernauts to space using African themes, Monáe hyperlinks back to the '50s big-band jazz era in which Sun Ra cultivated his cosmos theories. Monáe was mentored in part by unconventional hip-hop duo Outkast, which featured Andre 3000—as in the year 3000. Outkast borrowed their stylistics from P-Funk themes, most notably their *Stankonia* music in honor of the funk.

The mothership is in flight.



"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.