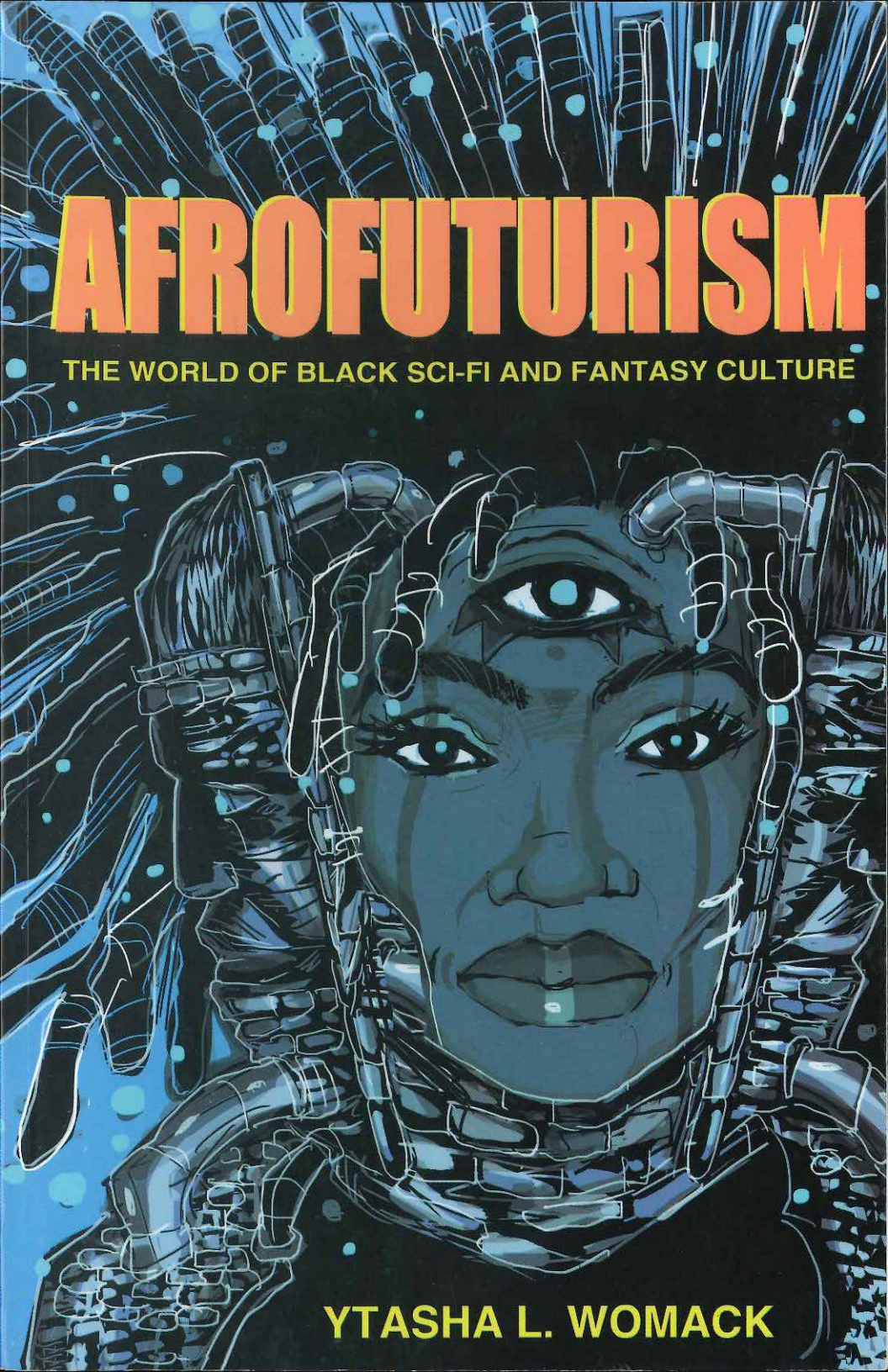

AFROFUTURISM
THE WORLD OF BLACK SCI-FI AND FANTASY CULTURE
YTASHA L. WOMACK

INTRODUCTION

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

Readers, our future is now. Fortunately, there are guideposts on this worded journey through the cosmos, key archetypes that anchor the imagination on this spaceship ride dubbed "freedom": the Dogon's Sirius star, the fabled mermaid, the sky ark, a DJ scratch that blares like a Miles Davis horn, an ankh, a Yoruba deity, an Egyptian god, a body of water, a dancing robot, an Outkast ATLien. And there's electricity, lots of electricity,

nanotechnology, and plants. Someone may shout, "Wake up!" Others will echo chants of hope. Maybe you'll hop into a parallel universe with a past that reads like a fantasy or a future that feels like the past. But no trek is complete until you spot a sundial-sized headdress or that psychedelic wig. We like really big hair or no hair at all. Call it the power of the subconscious or the predominance of soul culture gone cyberpop, but this dance through time travel that Afrofuturists live for is as much about soul retrieval as it is about jettisoning into the far-off future, the uncharted Milky Way, or the depths of the subconscious and imagination.

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

Stay Spacetastic,
Ytasha

EVOLUTION
OF A SPACE CADET



1

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.