



3

PROJECT IMAGINATION

BLACK
KIRBY

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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.

Project Imagination

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

Project Imagination

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

the show was.) I was miffed that I didn't know these people. I was annoyed that when science and technology are discussed, the images of black scientists or inventors don't come to mind. Necessity is the mother of invention, and, historical barriers aside, creation and invention are not determined by skin color. I thought about how empowering it would be for kids of color to know that these inventions were created by people who looked like them. I thought about the importance of the world knowing that people of all walks of life have contributed—and are contributing still—to scientific and technological innovations every day. I thought about the power of ideas and the resilience waged by the imagination.

Part of the Afrofuturist academic's work is uncovering these scientific inventors past and present and incorporating their stories into the larger conversation about science, technology, creativity, and race. Alondra Nelson created the Afrofuturism Listserv in the late 1990s, the first online community devoted to exploring technology and the black experience. Today she writes about African Americans, culture, and science. With her Listserv, she introduced the narrative of hope and imagination and its role amongst black scientists and those who work in the medical field. "I wanted to look at Afrofuturism beyond [just] a lens for looking at music. It's great that there are important figures for looking at Sun Ra and Lee Scratch Perry, but I wanted to push it beyond exploring literature and music. It was about how we can use these insights to think through other kinds of projects, a social science project. For example, how do we get people of color into the STEM fields? Can Afrofuturism, through literature, music, or theory be a way to change prevailing ideas about what science and tech look like?"

Internet Rules

Afrofuturists in the mid-1990s through the mid-2000s were wrestling with the latest game-changing technology of the time, the Internet. The Internet connected global communities, was an information portal, and lowered the barrier of entry to commerce. A small-business owner in Zimbabwe could go global, urban American kids could have unlimited access to information, and people with few resources could get their stories told, documented, and distributed with the click of a mouse . . . that is, if they could afford computers and Internet service. Stories about the digital divide, the percentage of kids of color with computers versus those without, limited broadband in inner-city communities, and lack of computers in urban schools all flooded the media. The urgency led to the creation of conferences on the matter. Between the academic study of the subject and the commercial prospects of an interconnected world, creating equal access to the Internet became a priority for activists and tech companies alike.

The AfroGEEKS conference was held in 2004 and 2005 at the University of California in Santa Barbara. Created by Professor Anna Everett, the conference centered on new media and technological innovation in urban American, Africa, and the African diaspora. Topics included the structural barriers to information technology (IT) access, bloggers and virtual communities, the influence of traditional science education on black youth, high-tech racial surveillance and profiling, and effective models of innovative IT use and adoption.

Conference creators charged that the technology and race debate prioritized the divide at the expense of the ongoing

technological innovation in African American communities. “Though rarely represented today as full participants in the information technology revolution, black people are among the earliest adopters and comprise some of the most ardent and innovative users of IT,” a statement on the conferences website read. It continued, “It is too often widespread ignorance of African Diasporic people’s long history of technology adoption that limits fair and fiscally sound IT investments, policies, and opportunities for black communities locally and globally. Such racially aligned politics of investment create a self-fulfilling prophesy or circular logic wherein the lack of equitable access to technology in black communities produces a corresponding lack of technological literacy and competencies.”² Everett, along with Amber Wallace, later wrote a book with strategies to encourage advocates, *AfroGEEKS: Beyond the Digital Divide*.

This question of access underscored the dot-com emergence; it became an issue in the rush to fund the next tech start-up in the vein of Facebook, the creation of new media, and the blogger craze. Suddenly, with the Internet, the cost to reach an audience, sell services, and post information was minimized. Moreover, the use of technology, particularly social media in African American households, outmatched the general population. Over a quarter of all Twitter users in the United States are black.³ Yet capitalization of tech businesses remains an issue. How could these tools be used to level the playing field? The quest for the answers continues. Although these issues are weighted in practicality, art and literature created in Afrofuturistic veins were obvious inspirations for present-day social change, technology, and the reenvisioning of the future.

Project Imagination

Not surprisingly, the Internet and today's technology are actually pushing the ideas in Afrofuturism forward. Gamers, app creators, start-up tech companies, inventors, animators, graphic artists, and filmmakers have faster and cheaper tools at their disposal to use to build and share with the world. The ideas that generate these creations are shared instantly on social media. "I think the movement has evolved," says Stacey Robinson, artist and Afrofuturist, who uses principles of sacred geometry to guide his work. He says, "The technology was the catalyst. I would say it's ironic that technology would forward Afrofuturism. We've talked and theorized about it, but now we can talk to people who feel the way that we do. We can examine the past and theorize the future. Back in the day it would have been Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. Du Bois dominating the conversation on race. But now, someone on the Internet whose name you don't know with an online alias can contribute. I think that's Afrofuturism, that you can recreate a persona online and reinvent yourself with more ease and explore yourself. We're learning about black scientists who are doing things that we have theorized about— inventing things that we have explored and theorized about in our childhood."

