

RADICAL TEACHER

A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

Afrofuturism: Race, Erasure, and COVID

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IMAGE: COURTESY OF THE ARTIST, ALISHA B. WORMSLEY

“THERE ARE BLACK PEOPLE IN THE FUTURE” reads an art installation (Image A) created by Alisha B. Wormsley in the summer of 2018. The billboard, part of an annual community art project in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, was removed after being embroiled in a controversy when opponents deemed it racist, offensive, and divisive. In speaking about the installation, Wormsley stated, “It started out as a black nerd sci-fi joke. A response to the absence of non-white faces in science fiction films and TV...Afrofuturism dares to suggest that not only will black people exist in the future, but that we will be makers and shapers of it, too” (Sharpe 2018). In an act as familiar as the African American tradition of call-and-response, Wormsley laughs to keep from crying—that is, she deftly deploys humor to address a fundamental problem: Black erasure. What started out as a response to the absence of non-white faces in sci-fi became a rallying cry against gentrification and the literal removal of Black faces from their neighborhoods, which are often their historical homeland, the places to which their ancestors relocated after emancipation. Pittsburgh is one of the most gentrified cities in the United States and neighborhoods like East Liberty are a prime example of America’s preoccupation with policing, displacing, and erasing Black bodies. Wormsley’s installation counters this oppression and, judging by the response, successfully so. The billboard does not open old wounds but reveals how those wounds have been left to fester, how healing is a long way off. After a successful petition by supporters, the billboard owner offered to put the installation back on display, but Wormsley refused. The wound has been exposed and we must confront it.

In the ensuing years since the controversy, Wormsley’s installation has grown into a larger multimodal collection with dozens of pieces that incorporate the now famous phrase in various ways. Wormsley’s work has attracted critical as well as popular attention. Its artistic, cultural, and socio-political influence continues to grow: signs that read “There are Black People in the Future” have appeared at social justice protests; musician Otis Galloway’s 2018 electronic album, with its distinctively futuristic funk vibe, is titled “There are Black People in the Future (REMASTERED) Inspired by the Art of Alicia (sic) B. Wormsley.” Meanwhile social justice organizations like the Pittsburgh-based *SisTerPGH* have commissioned billboards that read “There Are Black Trans People in the Future”—a modification of Wormsley’s phrase enacted in recognition of “Trans Remembrance Day,” which honors those lost to transphobic violence.

Wormsley’s work continues to inspire and presently is a part of an Art-Work-in-Residence Program taking place in cities like Houston and Detroit, and overseas in countries like Germany. According to the program, “There Are Black People in the Future” is both a project of critical memory intervention and a catalyst for conversations that promote positive change. It, like this special issue, is interested in imagining the unimaginable. Imagining blackness in the future is a radical act that, as bell hooks articulates, contests a “deep nihilism [that] penetrates in a destructive way the very ground of our being. It is there in that space of collective despair that one’s creativity, one’s imagination is at risk, there that one’s mind is fully colonized, there that

the freedom one longs for is lost (341). In countering erasure, the essays comprising this issue utilize pedagogies that make visible the possibilities and potentialities Afrofuturism offers. They explore different texts and textures that intimate a future not overly determined by prescribed racial constructs but one that embraces the varied traditions, experiences, knowledge(s), and cultures of Black people.

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Our decision to publish this special issue on teaching Afrofuturism during a global pandemic is in part an acknowledgement of the radical transformations taking place within distinct kinds of classrooms, not simply those located within the walls of academia. Akin to Wormsley and as reflected in the essays comprising this special issue, we are interested in Afrofuturism as critical memory intervention and catalyst for conversations that promote positive change. (Project Row Houses) As a launching point for their conversation on erasure, we asked authors to consider Dewitt Douglas Kilgore’s definition of Afrofuturism as a “cultural force, an episteme that betokens a shift in our largely unthought assumptions about what histories matter and how they may serve as a precondition for any future we may imagine” (564). We chose this definition of Afrofuturism because we are not only interested in what Afrofuturism is but also what it *does* and what our authors do with it. Kilgore’s articulation gestures toward both the future and the past, helping us understand Afrofuturism as an immersive artform that lends itself to forward-thinking and alchemizing actions. The pandemic has made Black erasure visible in ways that cannot be ignored. Through the lens of Afrofuturism, the authors featured here investigate the ways in which erasure is reified in contemporary American society and also advance counter-narratives that disrupt this erasure. When we say “erasure,” we are referring to the deliberate material, representational, and literal abolition of blackness—Black people, their experiences, and their culture(s).

In this introductory essay, we, a queer Black woman and a straight white man, start by rooting our special issue in historical specificity. We demonstrate how America’s longstanding practice of Black erasure has resulted in a present-day reckoning, exhibited by the movement for Black lives, the *1619 Project*, and the January 6th insurrection, which compels us to reevaluate what is meant when we say “America.” Next, we provide a brief history of the field, grounding readers in key Afrofuturistic concepts and familiarizing them with our particular deployment of Afrofuturism. From here we utilize the seminal dates of January 6th, 2021, and March 13th, 2020, respectively, as

devices to highlight Afrofuturism's significance as both a theory and a praxis used to analyze and understand Black people and their culture—historically and presently. Afrofuturism can make truth-tellers of us all. As articulated by Ashley R. Hall, truth-tellers are those “trouble-makers [whose] truth-telling is transformative because it generates moments for us to (re)imagine and redefine our [Black] lives beyond the now by making visible the hegemonic frames working to exploit, dehumanize, and dispose [of? Dispossess?] us” please leave this as is because it's a direct quote (343). Correspondingly, the essays which make up this special issue do the important work of Afrofuturistic theorizing by analyzing texts (film, literature, and fashion) as well as the essential and acute work of engaging Afrofuturism as praxis (through their pedagogy).

“In America,” scholar Ta-Nehisi Coates tells us, “it is traditional to destroy the black body—it is heritage” (103). During three eventful years between 1919 and 1921, the world was treated to the end of its first “Great War,” a global pandemic killed about 50 million people (depending on who's counting), and the original “Fascist Manifesto,” which was published in Europe just as the Soviets were building their Comintern—socialism and barbarism both taking advantage of the armistice to begin their world-historical collision course. Meanwhile, the US was suffering another explosion of racialized violence (more than usual, that is—anti-blackness being both foundational and unyielding in that country no matter its particular “quality” at any one time). Responding from New York to these assaults and lynchings during the Red Summer of 1919, a 20-something Claude McKay was inspired to write what would become his most famous poem, “If We Must Die,” now a classic of Black radicalism, which exhorted his fellow people of color: “If we must die, let it not be like hogs” but rather “Pressed to the wall, dying, but fighting back!” (177-78)

Two years on from its publication—and very much fighting back—the Greenwood district of Tulsa (famously known as Black Wall Street) lay in flames and around one hundred of its Black residents, including women and children, had been murdered by the curiously common American marriage of white-supremacist state power with vigilante “justice.” A century on, and this history remains locked in rhyme. Or perhaps it's more accurate to say, cribbing from Jameson, that the above historical anecdotes are still “what hurts.” Today's attacks on journalist Nikole Hannah-Jones's *1619 Project* (2020) is Coates's argument writ large. The attacks against the *1619 Project* reveal the nation's discomfort with confronting its past. Additionally, the attacks signal a cultural pattern of and a dangerous commitment to erasing the material vestiges of slavery, which can be achieved only if one works diligently to scourge any trace of its legacy and its representational existence. These types of material and representational erasures can also be seen in recent attacks on Critical Race Theory and in Florida's pending legislation, SB148, which makes white discomfort a crime (Scully 2022). All of this speaks to America's refusal to claim its Black citizens and acknowledge the full range and complexity of their histories, lives, experiences, and humanity. Equally important, it illustrates how the past continues to haunt the present. Coates continues, “Enslavement was not merely the antiseptic

borrowing of labor—it is not so easy to get a human being to commit their body against its own elemental interest. And so enslavement must be casual wrath and random manglings, the gashing of heads and brains blown out over the river as the body seeks to escape” (103). During the pandemic, we have seen Black bodies subjected to those wraths (the transphobic killing of Barbie Pugh), manglings (the neo-minstrelarity of Jessica Krug), gashings (the massive deportation of Haitians asylum seekers), and blow-outs (the police murder of Amir Locke).

And then in late 2019, of course, word came from Wuhan that a new and especially virulent illness was rapidly starting to spread, taking full advantage of new pathogenic routes offered by industrial food production to make the leap from animal to human, and thereby helping inaugurate a succession of events that reveal history to be neither an arc nor one that inevitably bends toward justice. The subsequent lockdowns in March 2020 felt for many to be pulled straight from a dystopian novel, though the inevitable “resistance” was comprised less by rebel freedom fighters than fascoid whiners who, in their intransigence, helped make a pandemic endemic, prolonging antiviral restrictions that only further fed their beloved and self-perpetuating sense of persecution. But eventually this “certainty” of oppression was turned outward and, like the Red Summer, manifested as violence—social, psychological, and physical. According to the Economic Policy Institute, Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) make up most essential workers in key industries like food services, agriculture, security, medical assistants, and residential facilities aides, making them more likely to experience exposure to COVID-19 and, due to structural racism, less likely to receive proper medical care. Carelessly, medical professionals in European nations, such as French physicians Drs. Jean-Paul Mira and Camille Lochte, bluntly suggested that people of African descent be used as tests subjects for COVID19 vaccine testing. These incidents demonstrate how, in both the national and global imagination, blackness [decide on Blackness or blackness and make consistent throughout—remains disposable. Medical disposability of Black bodies harkens back to America's long history of medical abuse against Black people from as early as 1845 when Dr. John Marion Simms, the father of gynecology, violently experimented on enslaved Black women; to 1951, when Johns Hopkins University medical teams illegally harvested cells belonging to Henrietta Lacks; to as recently as 2020, when U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement was accused of forcibly sterilizing Black and other women of color immigrants. These incidents illustrate how the past continue to reinscribe itself in the present.

Practitioners of Afrofuturism, like contributors Wendy W. Walters and Gisele L. Anatol, understand that critical as well as innovative engagement with the past is important to charting new paths toward a more humane future. More precisely, Walters engages her experiences of simultaneously teaching Afrofuturist courses at a small liberal arts college and a state prison. By focusing on questions of temporality, Walters connects these seemingly disparate spaces by way of Black art and scholarship in order to link the “altered timeframes” caused by both COVID and incarceration. Anatol's essay centers on an exploration of

the ways in which the “past permeates the present” by asking students to consider how history shapes their visions of an inclusive and intersectional future. Anatol “encourage[s] students to consider how the burgeoning field of Afrofuturism allows artists to question the realities and ‘logics’ established by colonial regimes, neo-colonial powers, systemic racism, and other imbalances in contemporary legal, social, and political structures.”

The ways in which America has chosen to engage (or not engage) its past—especially its legacy of racism and subjugation—illustrate how those traditions Coates traces become heritage. Consequently, it is difficult if not impossible to consider the future without reckoning with the past and this failure to do so underscores how we allow these erasures to take palace. Joni Boyd Acuff argues, “Whether intentional or unintentional, acts of erasure secure white power and white property...[E]rasure allow[s] the dominant group to evade the topic of race” and the role of racism in American society (529-30). George Floyd signals our most salient example of literal erasure today. Floyd’s murder in Minneapolis at the hands of yet another gleeful killer cop engendered the largest protest movement in the history of the US, with scenes of endless masked mass? protestors adding to the sense of “End Times.” And the centennial of the Bolshevik Revolution—with its original (if not always practiced) promises of economic, racial, and gender parity—would see self-declared socialist politicians propelled back into the US spotlight after years of screaming from the wastelands of ideological exile. All of this just in time for the world to witness an almost exclusively white male crowd in Virginia chanting slogans such as “blood and soil” (an English translation of the original Nazi mantra for Aryan racial purity) and “Jews will not replace us”—both battle cries perhaps recognizable to Red Army soldiers when they finally entered Berlin.

Unsurprisingly, we now understand these “battle cries” as a violent response to the myriad audible global Black Lives Matters protests that reverberated throughout America and the rest of the world after Floyd’s death. Cities in North America (Minneapolis, Washington, DC, Chicago); Africa (Lagos, Tunis, Pretoria); Asia (Seoul, Tokyo, Hong Kong); Europe (London, Berlin, Pristina); Oceania (Auckland, Sydney, Melbourne), and Latin America (Bogotá, Rio de Janeiro) heard the Virginia chants of “you will not replace us” and answered, “you will not defeat us.” In a more subtle but no less violent response, some segments of the American populace sought to undermine the movement for Black lives with calls of “All Lives Matter,” a sabotage intended to expunge Black people, their lives, and the culture. Christina Friedlaender articulates this erasure when stating, “Many white Americans have taken issue with the [BLM] tagline itself, subverting it in the reply: ‘all lives matter.’ Proponents of this subverted tagline occasionally fail to see why it is a problematic response, regarding it as more morally inclusive. However, this tagline is a racist erasure of the very problems Black Lives Matter is addressing, namely that Black lives are not valued equally compared to white lives, and thus the very use of this subverted tagline constitutes a kind of harm” (5). Friedlaender is correct. Acknowledging the importance of Black lives does not disavow the lives of non-Blacks.

Instead, this proclamation demands we engage Black lives beyond symbolic gestures of diversity or inclusion and intentionally avow said engagement as praxis of one’s humanity.

But in the dystopia of today, we must also consider the dynamic nature of Afrofuturism and its ability to shape a future not only centered on countering erasure but also committed to bringing forth Black agency and empowerment.

So what might an artistic movement, famously (if unfairly, as some of our essay writers and other critics point out) associated with the period of the 1960s-1980s—the music of Sun-Ra, the films of John Akomfrah, the fictions of Octavia Butler—have to offer the first fifth of the twentieth-first century? Well, plenty it turns out. Afrofuturism as a literary genre can be pleasant to digest and easily situated as science fiction’s little (darker) brother, the one who dreams of a better world absent racism and oppression. In an aesthetic context, Afrofuturism can be quite palatable as well as safe because we can limit its impact to literary imaginings. Utopias are unproblematic by design. But in the dystopia of today, we must also consider the dynamic nature of Afrofuturism and its ability to shape a future not only centered on countering erasure but also committed to bringing forth Black agency and empowerment. In doing this work we must also consider the ways in which Afrofuturism makes visible the interconnected nature of social categories (like race, class, and gender) and systems of power (political, economic, and educational, among others). Those who have traversed the thorny terrain of marginalization understand that the “consequences of this redirection are the erasure of issues of power and subordination; thus, there is no questioning of the status quo or racialized inequities” (Acuff 523).

Situating Afrofuturism

Broadly speaking, Afrofuturism is a genre of literature, art, and film that takes up science fiction elements to narrate Black culture and history. More precisely, it speaks to the ways in which literature, film, music, and other forms of art transform science-fiction and fantasy elements—such as advanced technology, space- and time-travel, other worldly settings, and supernatural powers—by incorporating Black culture and history into narratives that have traditionally centered whiteness. As Ytasha Womack argues, Afrofuturism is “both an artistic aesthetic and a framework for critical theory” that, hydra-headed, “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 re-envisioning of the past and speculation about the future rife with cultural critiques” (9). Indeed, this movement seems particularly suited to provide much-needed explanatory power to dissect (and more importantly, to suggest a few alternate lines of flight far away from) the contemporary confluence of pandemics,

racist violence, incipient fascism, and environmental catastrophe.

As contributing authors Dalia Davoudi and Kimberly Nichele Brown point out in this special issue, the pasts of Afrofuturism extend well beyond the usual markers that ground the movement in the '60s. Reaching back at least to Martin Delany's *Blake* (1859), and perhaps even to William Wells Brown's *Clotel* from 1853, Afrofuturism is arguably as old as the Civil War and most likely emerges as far back as African American cultural production itself. Davoudi asks us to consider the "culturally diffuse aesthetics" of Afrofuturism at work in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century texts, far earlier than the usual years attached to its emergence. Tracking this movement across centuries along with her students, Davoudi describes the "political and pedagogical potential of teaching the multi-valent histories of Afrofuturist thought in times of Covid." Similarly, Brown shows us how Afrofuturism can be deployed as a praxis to access a "usable past" in her pandemic-era remote classroom. Through what she calls "rehearsing hope," Brown's essay demonstrates how students rehearse hope as a heuristic, therapeutic reading and watching strategy to engage "the imaginative texts primarily of Black women that showcased the apocalypse, contagion, and dystopian presents/futures from an intersectional perspective," thereby confirming survival as the ultimate act of hope.

Nonetheless, those interested in mapping venerable Afrofuturism often cite Derrick Bell's 1992 short story "The Space Traders" as the quintessential if not original Afrofuturistic text—even though the term "Afrofuturism" was not coined until two years later in 1994, in Mark Dery's seminal article, "Black to the Future: Interviews with Samuel R. Delany, Greg Tate, and Tricia Rose." Here Dery defined Afrofuturism as "speculative fiction that treats African-American themes and addresses African-American concerns in the context of twentieth-century technoculture—and, more generally African-American signification that appropriates images of technology and a prosthetically enhanced future" (Dery 1993, 180). An "Afrofuturistic" aesthetic (if not the genre per se) was underway prior to the 1990s, as seen in the literary works of Octavia Butler, Samuel Delany, and Ishmael Reed, as well as in the musical talents of Sun Ra, Jimi Hendrix, and Earth, Wind, and Fire. Many critics today consider W.E.B. Du Bois's aptly titled 1920 short fiction "The Comet" to be the original—in a simulacra kind of way—Afrofuturistic literary text: a story that follows two survivors—a Black man and white woman—as they journey toward rebuilding civilization and redefining humanity in non-racialized terms after the earth is struck by a comet.

And why shouldn't Afrofuturism seek out its apotheosis in the stars, in futures so far off as to be unrecognizable, and therefore fully untethered from the current conjuncture that seems so unable—and at least as unwilling—to conjure anything approaching equality, dignity, and sustained existence for people of color? This, Du Bois tells us, is easier said than done, as the discovery of other survivors results in the return of previous racialized social patterns that had been temporarily overturned in the wake of the comet's arrival and the catastrophe that ensued. But even if Du Bois's vision didn't work out in the end, just a basic

knowledge of US history explains why Black imaginaries might so often look toward the future in order to imagine a place where the rudiments and legacies of slavery, Jim Crow segregation, de jure and de facto second-class status, racialized terror, and mass incarceration might be transcended in the service of *at least* equal rights and privileges. And a cursory glance at contemporary entertainment reveals that the themes and trappings of Afrofuturism not only obtain today but are perhaps the strongest guiding energies behind much cultural production by Black and non-Black artists alike. The "ArchAndroid" and "Dirty Computer" of Janelle Monáe, the unencumbered galactic exploration of Erkyah Badu, or the unparalleled imaginings of artists like Drexciya, whose work—rooted in the origin story of an enslaved woman who gives birth to new Africans called Drexciyans—has inspired numerous actors, musicians, authors, and visual artists to create works that counter America's death drive (David 2021). Black-centered future-oriented films like *See You Yesterday* and *The Girl With All The Gifts*, writers of contemporary Afrofuturist tales such as N.K. Jemison and Tracy Deonn, the prevalence of these themes, images, artists, and artistry imply an inflection point: Afrofuturism seems to be ascendant at the same moment many of us feel—whether thanks to the virus, rapidly fraying social conditions across much of the world, or increasingly imminent environmental collapse—that we have run out of any future at all.

As the aforementioned art and artists suggest, Afrofuturism will have much to say not only about the future but also its creation. Along with Womack, picking up the mantle from early Afrofuturistic scholars like Delany, Rose, and Tate, are critics like Isiah Lavender, De Witt Douglas Kilgore, Lisa Yaszek, Alondra Nelson, Amadine H. Fauchaux, Ashley Hall, Lonny Avi Brooks, and Phoenix Alexander, who offer rich understandings of Afrofuturism that speak to the genre's complexity while staying true to its emphasis on resistance. These critics reinvigorate our imagination regarding the myriad ways Black people and culture(s) would and could exist in a technologically advanced future (Brooks 2018). Makeba Lavan's article asks us to imagine and reimagine notions of citizenry that aim for more than what is currently allotted, that breathes life into new futures. In doing this work, Lavan explains how "Afrofuturism allows African diasporic writers to imagine new and alternate cultural elements" in the service of "true citizenship and equity." Using two courses she taught across a full year of Covid education, Lavan explores these imaginaries while providing a narrative arc around her teaching during antiracial uprisings twinned with a global pandemic. These essays and other examples of Afrofuturist cultural production are less interested in "mere" acceptance, representation, and integration—choosing instead, as Kandice Chuh has urged us, to "imagine otherwise" entirely, perhaps a tacit (and sometimes explicit) conviction that reform is less necessary—and most likely less useful—than wholesale reinvention (Chuh 2003). Perhaps this also helps explain some of Afrofuturism's marvelously baggy capaciousness alongside an immanent intersectionality in its tendency to focus on the full and simultaneous constellation of imbricated nightmares at once, spotlighting the foolish impossibility of once again trying to pick apart one existential problem at a time.

January 6, 2021: Watching Men Like Lovecraft

Perhaps nothing so neatly conjoins the Afrofuturist preoccupations of simultaneous environmental and social catastrophe better than the helixing of Covid-19 to the Insurrection of January 6th. Far worse than even Charlottesville and culminating in the first few days of 2021's *annus horribilis*, a bunch of militia-LARPing cowboys converged on the Capitol and tried to rid the place of Indians for good—breaking windows, beating police officers, and looking around for a vice president or at least a House speaker to hang. To compound matters, as Martin Luther King famously worried to Harry Belafonte just before he was assassinated, “I fear I may have integrated my people into a burning house.” Though even a figure as prophetic as MLK couldn't have known how terrifyingly accurate his metaphorical language would turn out to be: While the US continues to smolder socially and environmentally (threatening full eruption on both fronts), the rest of the Earth—or at least large swaths of it that previously housed humans in relative comfort—is variously on fire, threatening to become so, and/or suffering from any number of other concerns, such as floods, droughts, sea-level rise, species decline, crop failures, infestations, etc. Which is to say, we find ourselves trapped in a historical conjuncture chock full of civilization-ending problems but perilously thin on what to do about them.

Our special issue of Afrofuturism engages the role this concatenation of aesthetic practices has offered us before—and very much still does—in the classroom, of course, but also far beyond. The introduction and subsequent essays consider how Afrofuturist themes and imagery might manifest themselves in the 21st century with materials that remark upon our perilous times. For example, before we turn to the classroom for answers—or at least for a few generative Afrofuturist examples that might hopefully point the way—we want to examine two contemporary popular “prestige” television shows that center Afrofuturist themes and imagery at the intersections of global health crises, environmental collapse, histories of racial terror, and the concomitant return of rabid and unapologetic white supremacy. If the most well-known moment of Afrofuturism is the musical explosion of the '60s and '70s, film and television have been just as popular media for the movement at least since the release of *Black Panther* in 2018. Indeed, video is often the way many contributors to this issue offer Afrofuturist objects to their students in class. Add to that the fact that, as January 6th dramatically revealed, the Revolution—or at least the Reaction—will *certainly* be televised. And like so many others fortunate enough to wait out much of the pandemic while employed almost exclusively from home, we have watched a *lot* of TV since March 2020.

Along with all the other fans that read and reread the original *Watchmen* graphic novel with the fervor and reverence of a religious text, we thought the portrayal of a group of edgy problematic white superheroes was an irreverent take on an enduring American myth—so, we waited eagerly for the small-screen adaptation. However, from the very beginning, the show we were offered was not

at all the *Watchmen* faithfully translated from the original page, but an entirely new vision that paid certain homage to the world of the source text—while also taking *full* Afrofuturist flight from many of the initial preoccupations entirely. Indeed, in the televisual *Watchmen* at least, Black erasure itself began to be erased. Premiering two months before the World Health Organization asked officials in Wuhan for more information on a new infection reported there, the first episode of *Watchmen* revealed in minutes that the original all-white cast of desperadoes meting out their vigilante justice was gone. The formidable Regina King was now at the center as Angela Abar and her superhero alter ego, Sister Night (a somewhat unsubtle callout to both her race and gender). Opening with a young boy in 1921 Tulsa watching a silent film about a Black “marshal” who delivers righteousness to white scoundrels before pulling down his own hood to reveal himself to grateful (if surprised) townsfolk, the boy's viewing is soon interrupted by the destruction of “Black Wall Street” unfolding around him. After white mobs (many deputized by police) shoot indiscriminately at Black residents and set fire to their homes and business, the chaotic scene concludes by torpedoing us immediately to the present, wherein a Black police officer is murdered by a member of the Seventh Cavalry, an even larger and more virulent version of the Klan.

By immediately centering race—and interracial violence—above all else, the series intentionally collapses the supposed distance between the burning of Black Tulsa and our current moment. From here the show toggles effortlessly back and forth from the past to the alternate(ish) present, WWI to 2019, indexing through a televisual medium Saidiya Hartman's famously phrased contention about the very long and very active “afterlives of slavery” and the inexorable presence in the present of the past. Like another celebrated example of Afrofuturism, Octavia Butler's *Kindred*, *Watchmen* becomes in a sense a family drama without much of a family—or, rather, an attempt to limn and suture the lineages of Regina King's character, so disfigured by the violences and concomitant social practices of a century of US history, that she becomes the walking-talking embodiment of the Combahee River Collective's contention (itself building upon Claudia Jones and other strands of Black feminist thinking): “If Black women were free, it would mean that everyone else would have to be free since our freedom would necessitate the destruction of all the systems of oppression” (Combahee 1977).

The story just as willingly takes flight from its original characters and thereby demonstrates that inclusivity need not remain merely representational but, rather, that the very *inclusion* of Black bodies within the narrative can transform both the nature of the characters and the show's propulsive focus. For example, while Sister Night is an entirely new character within the *Watchmen* universe, the famous blue glow of Dr. Manhattan has been retrofitted into Angela's husband “Cal,” played by Black actor Yahya Abdul-Mateen II rather than Billy Crudup from the film version. So what was previously Dr. Manhattan's famously blue-glowing chromatic calling card becomes in this recasting at least partly ironic:



LEFT: ACTOR YAHYA ABDUL-MATEEN II IN *WATCHMEN*. CENTER & RIGHT: ABDUL-MATEEN II AS DR. MANHATTAN

In this new *Watchmen*, a “person of color” becomes one of an entirely other kind—and also the most powerful human in the universe. From this bold setup, the show reworks and rewires the plot forward by way of a number of Afrofuturist MacGuffins: Pills called “nostalgia” that literally let Angela relive her grandfather’s memories as a queer superhero after the Tulsa massacres, giving her access to previously lost family histories; Black crusader Hooded Justice becoming a vigilante after being tortured by cops that place the eponymous Klan hood over his face, one of many examples of the ways in which African Americans have critically reworked the objects of racist practice into the subjects of potential liberation; and, of course, the ultimate plan by the Kavalry to capture Dr. Manhattan and harness his infinite atomic energy in order to re-enshrine white supremacy for good—a plot point both speculatively fictional and also about as solid a metaphor for the centuries-long forced extraction of enslaved labor that built white-supremacist modernity in the first place. My catalog here only engages a few of the ways that a show not originally intended as Afrofuturist can nonetheless include such elements to renovate its themes, illuminating the contours of what we might think of as the Tulsa Century, wherein Black resilience, white violence, and environmental precarity spectacularly collide at the intersections of two centuries’ worth of the color line. Most importantly, with new Black characters, older characters recast with Black actors, and, through Tulsa, the centrality of historical erasure being salvaged on screen as *the* engine of the American experiment, *Watchmen* deploys Afrofuturist fixations in the service of erasing Black erasure. We should add to the above a series-finale *deus ex machina* by way of a rainstorm of frozen tiny squids, which refers back not only to the original graphic novel but also links this show by way of the tentacular to one of the founders of “weird literature” himself, H.P. Lovecraft, as well as to the next show on offer.

If *Watchmen* detailed how a thirty-five-year-old graphic novel could be repurposed to address concerns from our own ripped-from-the-headlines moment, *Lovecraft Country* is a show that not only calls back a full century earlier to Lovecraft’s original writings but also more forcefully

demonstrates how the preoccupations of Afrofuturism can spectacularly dismantle and recombine racist primary sources in the service of Black “emancipatory internationalism” (Ortiz 6). Based on the novel of the same name by Matt Ruff, this excursus isn’t intended to champion the work of a white writer *as* an example of Afrofuturism but, rather, to showcase how the raw materials of Black history in the US can be reworked within the cultural productions of Black and white writers alike by way of the liberating openness of Afrofuturist preoccupations. (And talk about excavating horror from dark materials: *Watchmen* show creator Damon Lindelof apparently got the idea to set the opening scenes of *Watchmen* in Tulsa after having read Ta-Nahesi Coates’s magisterial “The Case for Reparations.”) But to properly contextualize *Lovecraft Country*, we need to first briefly place Lovecraft the writer at the intersections of creative renown (he has become what many people—rightly or wrongly—consider the father of “weird literature”) and American racism (he was also famously, venomously, continuously, and unapologetically bigoted against pretty much anyone not from Anglo-Saxon stock).

His execrable 1912 poem “On The Creation Of N-----s,” considered his most racist work (which, frankly, is saying a *lot*) gleefully frames people of African descent as a liminal race between “Man” and “beasts,” a “semi-human figure” who God “fill’d it with vice.” However, reading Lovecraft against his own repugnant grain (not in the service to rehabilitate him, of course, but, borrowing from Gramsci, to renovate and make critical—or at least usable—his breathtaking racial animus), we might engage his other racist works to outline the ways that racisms grounded in anti-blackness diffuse, diffract, and metastasize in order to differentially encompass other non-white (or otherwise othered) groups. For example, in the short story “The Terrible Old Man” (1920), three would-be robbers, “Angelo Ricci and Joe Czaneck and Manuel Silva” bear last names that just happen to flawlessly represent the three ethnic groups—Italians, Austro-Hungarians, and the Portuguese—most heavily represented among those more recently settled in the area Lovecraft called home. They attempt to rob an old man “reputed to be both exceedingly rich and exceedingly

feeble" in the fictional seaside Massachusetts town of Kingsport, one of seven times this imaginary location would serve as a scene of racially interrupted tranquility. In this case, thanks to the intrusion of bodies that Lovecraft (along with much of the race science of the time) considered both non-white and inferior, the "native" inhabitants of this made-up village already knew well enough to stay away from the old man. But the hapless criminals, as if the readers needed more confirmation, "were not of Kingsport blood; they were of that new and heterogeneous alien stock which lies outside the charmed circle of New England life and tradition." Soon to be found dead, of course, all three bodies were "horribly slashed as with many cutlasses, and horribly mangled as by the tread of many cruel boot-heels, which the tide washed in" by a man who many "believed to have been a captain of East India clipper ships in his day." Fondly invoking the trappings of Anglo-Saxon colonization and exploitation, Lovecraft makes a literary argument here about racial hierarchy along with a warning around the possible punishments for any subalterns daring to contest this frame.

What, then, might be the televisual *Lovecraft Country* deserving of his vile name? For the show itself, it's an otherwise gorgeously recreated 1950s Chicago, but also stuffed with the less flattering period details of Jim Crow segregation, militia-like violence, and police brutality. So, aside from the classic cars and period dress, *Lovecraft Country* reaches across the landscape to affectively render the experiences of anti-blackness by those forced to endure it in perhaps its most "accurate" representational ambit, that of abject supernatural horror. The show also tracks some of the legacies and lineages that infused *Watchmen's* sense of connection between the contemporary and the historical. For example, in the first episode, the main character, a Black man named Atticus Freeman (the nomenclature in *Lovecraft Country* is about as subtle as *Watchmen*) finds a letter from his missing father about a long-secret family legacy linking them to New England. (Again, like Butler's *Kindred*—truly a touchstone of Afrofuturist familial temporality—personal histories and their inevitably racially "impure" pasts spur the plot.) While he is driving through Massachusetts to find his father, a bunch of racist deputies and their sheriff try to lynch Atticus and his friends—only to be murdered themselves in fitting Lovecraftian fashion: torn to pieces in the dark woods by large-toothed creatures called Shoggoths.

From this opening gambit, things only get weirder along similar lines. We arrive at a grand mansion in the woods, constructed by one Titus Braithwaite with funds from his robust nineteenth-century slave trade, and architecturally designed to open the gates of hell in order to give the Sons of Adam (his occult order, natch) eternal life. But thanks to the ubiquity of sexual violence within Titus's peculiar institution, it turns out that Atticus is distantly but directly related to him, and therefore also contains the holy blood that could open this portal to never-ending power. Atticus, of course, will eventually be sacrificed for the benefit of these white Sons (which include at least one white daughter), bringing into stark relief once again the double bind of slavery's afterlives: from the original sin of sexual violence committed against enslaved persons to the

generations of the future, like Atticus, forced to live with this passed-down "curse" that will eventually lead to the end of his own life in a scene of torture that brings to mind nothing so much as the archives of Southern slave "punishments."

From here, *Lovecraft Country* proceeds along these hyperbolically "weird" but also uniquely American lines, with a Second City chock full of Lovecraftian occurrences that nevertheless continually reflect the experiences of various non-white peoples living through the fungible and painful indignities of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries—from the self-estrangement of slavery to de jure and de facto segregation to the racialized policing helping warehouse millions in the age of mass incarceration. We meet Black ghosts of white medical experimentation trapped in a laboratory of death; a Two-Spirit Arawak imprisoned forever in a museum to protect the missing pages of the Book of Names; a Black woman who wakes up white after sleeping with a pale sorcerer (who will eventually turn out to be a woman, gender apparently as easy to slough off in this show as race); Atticus's closeted father covertly dating his Latinx partner, head of a cabal of persecuted but still-cheerily-performing drag queens; a South Korean sex worker confined there during the war who is in fact a "kumiho," a Korean spirit that must kill a hundred predatory men in order to be free; to the main characters attending the memorial for Emmett Till; to the character Hippolyta, who, thanks to an interdimensional portal, serves as a sort of wishlist of Black women's history and Afrofuturism at once, from partying in Paris with Josephine Baker, to leading a tribe of Dahomey Amazons, to a vigilante that kills a group of confederate soldiers—until she arrives far into the future and becomes absorbed into the community of a technological superior and apparently harmoniously multiracial civilization. And then of course the final climactic scene wherein two women of color must unite against their differences to kill the sorceress once and for all (with the Black man at the center of the tale sacrificed for the rest of the world). In other words, tidy entertainment for the *Hamilton* crowd this most certainly is not—which is perhaps why both of these shows are so much weirder, less coherent, and also perhaps far more *generative* in their open-ended messiness than anything lurking within that popular play. We might also think of these two shows as bookends of the pandemic, one ending before its arrival in the States, and the other finishing up at the high point of the racial reckoning that occurred in the summer of 2020. If *Watchmen* took liberties with its source material, then *Lovecraft Country* absolutely takes purposeful flight from its own inspirations—as Lovecraft himself needed far more redemption than the original *Watchmen* ever did, his works so suffused with racial animus that it actually propels the plot. *Lovecraft Country* knows this history intimately; indeed, one might convincingly argue that the shared contexts of the writer with his racism *are* the plot of his *Country*.

Alas, *Lovecraft Country* wasn't renewed for a second season, so unfortunately for Atticus, we'll never get to see the way the writers would've brought him back to life. Though ending the show with the slow execution of a Black man captured on film for everyone to see certainly recalls the murder of George Floyd (among many others), whose nightmarish death galvanized the aforementioned summer

of racial reckonings around the country. So perhaps the US doesn't need another season of *Lovecraft Country* because we've finally *become* an actual Lovecraft country—or, rather, belatedly realizing (for those ever lucky enough to be able to forget) that we've been this kind of country all along, just differentially doled out along various lines. And as we enter 2022, what could possibly be more Lovecraftian, more resolutely contrary to Afrofuturism—and, frankly, more antithetical to Black futurity altogether—than QAnon? Instead of addressing the climate catastrophe or any number of other actual threats, the men and women of this cult spend their time tilting at the windmills of a global cabal of blood-thirsty pedophilic Democrats, Satanists, liberals, and other “monsters” concocted by their right-wing fever dreams. If *Watchmen* and *Lovecraft Country* seem to push the boundaries of believability too far even for a fantasy show, neither of them have a thing on QAnon, which also has the “benefit” of being real—not in actuality of course but in its increasingly terrifying and very material social effects. So if racial shape-shifting seems a tough sell for a *fictional* narrative on TV, imagine the intellectual and ethical contortions QAnon demands from its adherents by way of its faith: Its latest bizarre mutation emerged in the form of a few dozen supporters packing Dallas's Daley Square on November 22nd, 2021—the site and anniversary of JFK's assassination—with the certainty that the murdered president's son (who also died, of course, in a plane crash in 1999) would return from his true redoubt: a hiding place where he and dozens of reportedly deceased celebrities have been living in exile for decades in order to combat the forces of global Satanic pedophilia. This homecoming would mark John-John's joining the Trump 2024 campaign as the Donald's running mate (macabre, sure—but also a nice little swipe at Pence's perceived “betrayal”), and their subsequent win would ensure a return to a terrifying and imaginary past that this time would also be a ceaseless future. This is why QAnon provides such a lively and sadly formidable foil to Afrofuturism: Both are projects centered in the belief that society is irredeemably broken but another world is possible—indeed, possibly already being born. For QAnon, however, the world it envisions after the “inevitable” clash of civilizations will be constructed from various bits of homophobia, sexism, racism, Christian nationalism, white supremacy, antisemitism, et al.—all combined with a millenarian desire for cleansing bloodshed that its adherents no doubt believe would make America—and, by extension, the world—finally great again. As we've learned from horror movies over and over and over again: the call, as usual, is coming from *inside* the house. And here, on the precipice of 2022, we will see if the new year will bring only fresh horrors or perhaps finally something like a new Popular Front that can take yet another stand against the worst of human darkness. In other words, we either choose Afrofuturism—or no future at all.

March 13, 2020: Seeing Yesterday's Future(s)

On Friday, March 13th, 2020, seven weeks after introducing Wormsley's billboard installation to my (Belinda's) undergraduate Afrofuturism class, aptly titled

“Coming of Age in Afrofuturism: Blackness, Erasure, and the Imagination,” three important and distinct “erasures” occurred. The first happened in the early morning -- a literal erasure as Breonna Taylor was murdered by Louisville police, igniting Black Lives Matter protests across the nation that would continue for months, growing ever louder and more powerful. The second erasure occurred by late morning, after I delivered my final lecture centered on the representational erasure of the fictional character Calvin Walker, a young Black man who dies at the hands of police in Stefon Bristol's sci-fi feature *See You Yesterday*. By late afternoon I would encounter a third erasure, this one material, as March 13th marked the last time I would see my students in person. COVID19's arrival would drastically change my students' relationship to our class and to one another. I teach at the nation's only flagship university that is also a Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI). My university is located in the southwest and enrolls nearly 15,000 degree seeking undergraduate students. With an average student age of 22 years and 49% of the student population identifying as Hispanic/Latino, my institution reflects what many US colleges and universities will look like in the near future (Official Enrollment). Problematically, our Black/African-American student population stands at 2% and our indigenous representation is not much better, with American Indian or Alaska Native comprising a mere 5%. Meanwhile, our white non-Hispanic student population is a robust 31%. My state considers itself a “Tri-Cultural State”—that is, Anglo, Hispanic, and Native. This “Tri-Cultural” myth is deployed quite often: I have encountered it at commencement ceremonies, political events, swearing-in ceremonies, athletic competitions, kindergarten graduations, and universities' presidential inaugurations. It is routinely stated as fact and often regurgitated by our general populace. And it is a lie. The absence of historical blackness from southwestern narratives and the marginalization of contemporary blackness from southwestern cultures reveal the “Tri-Cultural State” not only as myth but also as a weapon of racial erasure. Whether or not students were aware of it, they had already negotiated Black erasure prior to enrolling in my class.

The diverse and inclusive nature of my Afrofuturism course is unlike many of the less diverse classes I teach at this institution. In contrast to the statistics given above, my upper-level elective Afrofuturism course is quite varied: Cross-listed under English and Africana Studies, this class attracted students from a broad range: 33% of my students are Black/African American; 21% Hispanic/Latino; 38 % white non-Hispanic; 5% American Indian or Alaska Native; and 3% identified differently from those identities listed here—including Middle Eastern, Multi-Racial, and Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander. In terms of gender, 60% of my students are cisfemale; 38% cismale, and 2% trans and/or nonbinary. Moreover, many of my students are FirstGen, Dreamers, and international. Like our student population in general, the average age of the class is 23 years. (Official Enrollment).

I am a professor who sees immense value in mining knowledge from the quotidian. Accordingly, I use a myriad of nontraditional pedagogies, that, as a shorthand, I call contemplative standpoint. Contemplative pedagogy argues

that learning is enriched when students establish meaningful connections between the course materials and their lived experiences. Similarly, standpoint pedagogy is a positionality that recognizes identities are shaped by socio-cultural, economic, and political experiences. I am committed to establishing a high level of trust with my students so that when I put contemplative standpoint into praxis, they are ready to receive it. In this way I also teach careful consideration and risk-taking—important aspects of critical thinking and (literary) analysis. I am attentive to what my colleague Randi Gray Kristensen described (in a private correspondence) as “throwing a student out of the space of learning and into dissociation.” I know that meeting students where they are is critical to success. This is especially important in my courses, which involve teaching complicated theories and unfamiliar literary texts, typically written by authors who are not included in the Western canon. In such courses, students can be skeptical. I welcome their skepticism because it helps me demonstrate how they are already critical thinkers. I build on their skepticism, helping them to work through discomfort and to expand their frame of reference/minds. This work is just as important as the course content.

Though not forcibly didactic, Wormsley’s installation unapologetically intervenes in the discourse on resistance and asks its viewers/listeners/readers to intently contemplate what it would mean for Black people to live unshackled, empowered, and free? Black people in the United States have a complicated and often exploited relationship to capitalism/consumerism and labor/domesticity. Because of this complexity, I directed the class’s attention to [Wormsley’s domestic items](#): doll, teacup, nail, watch, sunglasses, and sunflower seeds. Embedded in each item are the words, “There are Black People in the Future.” Wormsley’s phrase is evident on most of the items; however, on some items the phrase is barely perceptible. This distinction became an excellent gateway to our primary aim: to engage Wormsley’s collection as a means to read and comprehend differently Black lives, histories, and culture(s) in order to position ourselves to imagine not just a better future but a different one. It is with this understanding that we engaged the film, *See You Yesterday*. An initial reading of *See You Yesterday* reveals a story about the death of another Black man at the hands of yet another trigger-happy police. If we look a bit closer, we can reveal a cloaked narrative layer—one that tells the story of inevitability where Black people can never escape American violence. In this way Calvin becomes not only a symbol of police brutality and Black subjugation but also of white psychosis. While these areas are important and deserving of critical attention, I, however, am interested in CJ’s narrative arc. CJ is Calvin’s younger sister, a budding scientist, and time-traveler. I wanted the class to explore this character as a vector of hope, an avenue for imagining new futures.

To give students a tangible idea of what it means to think differently, we read Rose Eveleth’s essay, “Why Aren’t There More Women Futurists?” This piece is a conversation between a number of women futurists who posit, “The future that gets imagined largely depends on the person doing the imagining. For a long time, the future has belonged to those who have not struggled” (Eveleth 2015). I encouraged

students to consider how are Black women, like Wormsley and the women in Eveleth’s essay, utilizing their voices to bring a different vision to the future? How might a position of struggle lead us to ask different questions? For example, in this same article AfricanFuturist Nnedi Okorafor offers an interesting perspective regarding cyborgs and subjugation: “That whole idea of creating robots that are in service to us has always bothered me...I’ve always sided with the robots. That whole idea of creating these creatures that are human-like and then have them be in servitude to us, that is not my fantasy and I find it highly problematic that it would be anyone’s.” (ibid). Students noted that, with few exceptions, in the science fiction they have read, self-aware robots irrationally destroy mankind; however, the literature often fails to tell the story from the robot’s perspective. Instead robots—self-aware or not—are presented as a warning about the dangers of technology rather than a cautionary tale about the dangers of white supremacy. Okorafor’s perspective demonstrates how marginalized people interpret robot uprisings differently. This viewpoint echoes my desire to use Afrofuturism to ask atypical questions as we imagine differently the future.

So, what does this work look like in an unexpected virtual classroom that has come about due to the pandemic? Breakout rooms. Plans for small group work were already in the making; however, virtual learning allowed me to create small groups and facilitate intimate conversations that complimented the asynchronous aspects of the course. Breakout rooms provided an opportunity to engage the film in a much more intimate way. Each group was asked to utilize one of Wormsley’s everyday/quotidian items as a prism through which to interpret differently *See You Yesterday*. Our discussion was guided by one probing question: How does CJ, like Wormsley, harness the quotidian and fashion it into an optimistic future for Black people? What follows is a snapshot of the discussion generated by the group that selected Wormsley’s [doll](#): Dolls are remarkable quotidian items. Existing under the guise of a child’s toy, dolls are really apparatuses of indoctrination and control that teach us how to love and nurture; whom to love and nurture; which bodies to value; and whose body belongs. Unlike Dr. and Dr. Clark’s famous “Doll Test” of the 1940s, which brought to light the determinantal psychological effects of Jim Crow on Black children’s racial perception and self-esteem, my twenty-first century students came of age when “Uncle Ben’s Rice” was rebranded “Ben’s” and Aunt Jemima brand syrup was mercifully taken out of circulation. They are children of Pulse Nightclub and Stoneman Douglass High School; of Obama’s presidency and Greta’s activism—they are cognizant of the power and harm of institutional racism and this awareness informed their interpretation of the doll.

Largely, the student group took the doll as a form of resistance. Noting the antebellum period dress, they grounded her in the history of slavery but not as a subjugated woman. Instead they wove a narrative of liberation around her body, arguing that although her people were enslaved and forced to labor in the cotton fields, she subverted this oppression by possessing a cotton dress and lace ribbon, something enslaved woman were rarely afforded. Rather than read these items as a sign of class,

they interpreted them as a sign of freedom and defiance — the doll’s unwillingness to be confined to the picture frame signals a refusal to be relegated to the margins of society. Also situated outside the picture frame but located away from the doll, there appears to be a piece of raw cotton and a rope—items that strongly hint at slavery, Jim Crow, and lynching. I asked the group to discuss the significance of the items’ placement above the doll’s head, blanketing her on either side. Generally, they felt this placement indicated an absence of oppression since the items were not a part of the doll’s body. I, however, wondered if the placement indicated a consciousness where the doll was aware of the items and the ways in which the vestiges of slavery are always already present, even if she isn’t corporeally bound by them?

Curiously, Wormsley’s decision to situate the doll within a gold frame did not conjure images of the Gold Coast, West Africa. Instead, students’ thoughts went to coltan-tantalum, the metal used in nearly 85% of gaming systems and cell phones that is illegally mined by corporations using exploited and subjugated laborers in the Congo. The students astutely noted that past is ever present as African countries continue to be raped of their resources by imperial countries (Ogazi 14). Even more astutely, they noted the pervasive nature of racism in online gaming. Without coltan-tantalum, PS4 and other systems would not exist; yet the very people who make gaming possible are the ones who are excluded from taking part in this pastime. This paradox resonated on a personal level for the group as the conversation came to an awkward halt. I asked the group if their interpretation(s) would change if we came to learn that coltan-tantalum was necessary for CJ’s time machine to work? I encouraged them to consider what the future would look like if coltan-tantalum was used in the service of enhancing and preserving Black life rather than exploiting and destroying it? Additionally, I wanted them to think about the significance of CJ’s time machine being comprised of parts borrowed from non-Black people. Is this a post-racial reading of belonging or an accurate reflection of our nation and communities? A student observed that the word “people” appears across the length of the doll’s skirt and stands alone, separate from the other words, most notably separate from the “There Are Black” portion of the phrase. To this student, the location of “people” indicated both solidarity and dedication—stating matter-of-factly, “if there are no Black people in the future, then there is no future for people.” Conversely, others saw it as an olive branch. They took “people” to mean that the doll would fight for all people—and not just Black people. This push-pull of liberation ideology is always thorny and although the conversation did not devolve into an “all lives matter” debate, it was apparent that some students could not envision blackness in a world absent of whiteness. At times, the students struggled under the weight of these follow-up questions, which made Afrofuturism all the more real. And isn’t that the point?

Although Afropessimism would have been appropriate here, not all students’ insights were pessimistic. Accompanying the doll is an ornament that seems to be a clock, which can symbolize an array of “times,” not just the historical past. Students identified the clock most strongly with CJ, interpreting it as an opportunity not to rewrite the past but rather to author a different future. Time, they

posited, is absolutely necessary to (re)imagine what could be—all other items are replaceable, time is not. Although the group did not articulate this as such, I took their statements on reclaiming time as an attempt to make sense of the ways in which blackness is seen as “frozen in time yet caught in a perpetual state of escape, fugitive movement (Hall 343); thus the dolls ability to “slip out of frame is to pursue an elsewhere that is not the current time and place one is forced to live in” (Hall 345). Inevitably, the conversation turned to time travel, providing the perfect opportunity to discuss the ways in which Black women’s bodies have been erased historically (doll) and contemporarily (CJ).

In *See You Yesterday*, the protagonist CJ must literally disappear in order to save her brother’s life. To preserve the space time continuum and to protect the balance between life and death, CJ cannot be seen as she traverses the past. One student argued that invisibility and erasure are not the same; the former is empowering and the latter, oppressive. Thus reminding us that if CJ were visible, her mission would fail. Here the student remixed invisibility as a superpower necessary for the greater good, noting that the absence of Black bodies is sometimes needed to carve space for other Black bodies to exist. We encountered a hurdle when I asked what happens when the absence is not temporary (like CJ’s) but permanent (like Calvin’s)? Nevertheless, this group of students displayed an advanced understanding of power dynamics—that sometimes things must be hidden in order to be effective. Predictably we ended with more questions than answers: What does it mean for young Black women to have to engage in literal erasure? How do these past events impact our present understanding of Black women? How might they inform a feminist future? In the end, CJ cannot save her brother, so what does that mean for Black people’s future?

If a doll can help us think differently as we imagine a future that does not reify the kinds of discrimination and marginalization we are trying to eradicate, then surely we can find inventive ways to open up avenues of belonging. By asking students to use Afrofuturism as a means to rupture everyday erasures Black people experience, I hope to get them thinking about how they can harness the quotidian and fashion it into something powerfully optimistic.

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