



## Article

# “Eyes in the Back of My Head”: Forecasting for Black Education

Maisha T. Winn<sup>1\*</sup>,

<sup>1</sup>School of Education, University of California, Davis, USA

## Introduction

[Past, present and future are] meaningful parts of a continuum and [are] dependent on the other. The present is the result of our history and our future is being conditioned by both the past and present ... one must anticipate circumstances, set goals, and make plans no matter how tentative. (Bowser, 1976)

It's the year 2032 and many Black parents globally have made the seemingly unthinkable decision to embed software into their children's clothing to record and transcribe interactions with educators throughout the school day. Uhuru, a start-up co-founded by Castle and Nia Jackson, launched the software, *Eyes in the Back of My Head*, after spending two years embroiled in a legal battle with Canyon Creek School District where both of their children were subjected to harsh school punishment practices.

In one incident, their 6<sup>th</sup>-grade daughter, Zarah, was accused of cheating by the teacher in front of her classmates: “I know you cheated. I have never had a Black student perform this well on a math exam in my 20 years of teaching. You will receive a zero!” Zarah, understandably shaken, shouted back at her teacher, “I did not cheat. I did not cheat.” The girl was crying inconsolably and flailing her arms. Claiming that she felt threatened, the teacher grabbed Zarah by her arms and forcibly removed her from the classroom. By the end of the day Zarah was suspended for making “terrorist threats” and disrupting the learning community, though none of Zarah's classmates said that she posed a threat to the teacher, nor did they themselves feel endangered.

After speaking with parents of other students in the class, one parent voluntarily collected statements from the children who had been present that day. Every child reported that they were more concerned for Zarah than for themselves or their teacher. The teacher, however, vehemently denied any wrongdoing and the school administration, along with the teachers' union, supported her. While this injustice was, indeed, the tipping point for the Jackson family, the seeds for Uhuru had been planted long before that day, during their own upbringing. In an interview with *Democracy Now!*, Castle and Nia discussed the inspiration for their start up.

Nia: When I was a kid growing up in Milwaukee, I would be on my way to school and my mom would always stop me and say, ‘Hey! You know mommy has eyes in the back of her head!’ My Dad would throw his head back and laugh when she said this. Then my mom would pull me close and hug me, whispering, ‘Seriously, baby, mommy is always with you. When I say that, I mean for you to know I am watching even when you don't think I am. Do the right thing ... and know that I have my eyes on others too!’

Interviewer: What did you make of that as a child?

Nia: Well, at first I had these images of eyeballs literally in the back of her head. Like, beneath her hair or something!

Interviewer: [Laughter]

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: [mtwinn@ucdavis.edu](mailto:mtwinn@ucdavis.edu)

Nia: No, seriously. I felt it! I really felt like she was with me. But now that I am a mom it has new meaning. Especially with school-aged children. Black children. There are so many times I wish I had access to scenes in my children's school lives. Zarah and Zion would tell me horrendous stories. Yet when I would talk to their teachers, they would look at me as if they had no idea what I was talking about. I felt like I was in that film from back in the day ... you know ... the Black horror film.

Interviewer: You mean the Jordan Peele film 'Get Out!'

Nia: Yes! That is what it can feel like for Black parents in their children's schools at times.

This scene making is at the heart of the *Eyes in the Back of my Head* software. Uhuru is currently mapping scenes that demonstrate the pervasiveness of anti-blackness and/or racist ideas that students—Black, Native American, Latinx, Filipino, Southeast Asian, and Haitian—experience with their educators. These scenes are transcribed, coded, and analyzed by a research team of ethnographers, historians, futurists, and critical race theorists. It's important to note that the Uhuru software was not designed to police educators. Rather, Uhuru's vision is more expansive. In the theory of change written into its mission statement, Uhuru insists that educators can learn from these transactions and that they can be leveraged as transformative justice teacher education tools. Castle Jackson explains the purpose behind the product design.

Castle: Uhuru is a Kiswahili word meaning "freedom." Nearly 60 years ago, Black writers, poets, scholars, and changemakers doubled as institution-builders creating Independent Black Institutions (IBIs) throughout the country that were committed to a Correct Black Education. That is, an education deeply committed to identity, purpose, and direction as outlined by Haki Madhubuti in his classic book, *From Plan to Planet*. Nia and I were greatly inspired by Madhubuti and his wife, Safisha Madhubuti, as well as The EAST organization out of Brooklyn that established the Uhuru Sasa Shule or Freedom Now School. Scholars like Maisha Fisher (Winn) and Russell Rickford underscore the lessons we may have missed from the Black Power Movement as they pertain to education.

Uhuru's research team partners with schools to establish community by unpacking these scenes and imagining multiple paths forward. In the best-case scenario, schools would engage in this community-building before a situation like what happened to Zarah could ever occur.

Naturally, there are groups of parents who are critical of the software. But not for reasons of surveillance. These parents want to use the evidence of ongoing harm and wrongdoing to hold educators and school administrators accountable for the dehumanizing treatment of their children. One parent who asked to remain anonymous expressed her concerns this way:

Our children's experiences in schools are traumatizing! Why should teachers get off? Where is the accountability for some of these so-called scenes that we can now see with our very eyes? It's like a soft-on-crime approach or Truth and Reconciliation situation where we all hold hands and sing 'Kumbaya' after witnessing our children being disrespected in school.

Yet, both Nia and Castle are adamant that they want Uhuru and the Eyes in the Back of My Head software to be a transformative tool. "We don't want this to be a crime scene. We lead with a restorative justice paradigm and ask, 'What can be done to make this right?'" Nia asserted. They recognize, however, that a technology initially designed in response to harm and wrongdoing is now more focused on reimagining than reacting.

What can we learn from Castle and Nia? What can we learn from their start up, Uhuru, and its Eyes in the Back of My Head software? Why these fictive characters? Why these places and products? Why now?

I wrote the "Eyes in the Back of my Head" forecast against the backdrop of uncertainty and disruption spurred by the COVID-19 global pandemic in March 2020. In those early weeks after "shelter-in-place" found many, including my family, working and schooling at home, forecasting was the only writing that made sense to me—an ethnographer by training and historian by necessity. "Eyes in the Back of My Head" was inspired by several signals I collected during that period. The first signal took place at the end of a public talk featuring Professor Shaun Harper

co-hosted by the Transformative Justice in Education (TJE) Center in the School of Education at the University of California, Davis, where a woman in the audience asked to speak to me. This woman, Ms. Dalia, shared her story of spending her son's senior year with him at his high school. I thought she was referring to school visits; however, she clarified that she actually went to school with him every day and attended every class for his last year of high school to ensure he would graduate. Ms. Dalia was concerned about the pervasiveness of racism and racist ideas that she felt disrupted relationships with teachers and her son—an African American boy—who experienced school discipline policies and practices that he deemed unfair. Of course, Ms. Dalia was not only an advocate for her son but for other Black students as well. When Black parents learned she would be at school during the day, they asked her to check on their children. I found Ms. Dalia's story profoundly disturbing yet oddly relatable given my observations as a Black mother of Black children in the U.S. education system.

I grappled with Ms. Dalia's story during Foresight Essentials Training at the Institute for the Future a few months before we found ourselves in the future shock of the COVID-19 pandemic. I was launching a futures project entitled "What is the future of Black education?" Although, I must admit that I struggled over the naming of my futures project. First, I called the project "What is the future of Black children in schools?" Then, "What is the future of educating Black children?" These earlier titles had too many limitations. For example, the first is fraught with damage-centered research (Tuck, 2009) and schools as "sites of Black suffering" (Dumas, 2014). I wanted my project to be forward thinking and to elevate the work of Black educators past and present who have committed themselves to ensuring Black children not merely "survive"—to borrow from Bettina Love (2019)—but also thrive. The second question also gave me pause because it, too, depends on old paradigms and suggests that there is something about the Black child that is the problem. By focusing on the future of Black education I consider the work in schools and out of schools as I focus on self-determined futures for Black children.

The protagonists in this forecast, Nia and Castle Jackson, are not unlike the artists, activists, and scholars who created IBIs while also reimagining education processes for children of African descent to engage their full humanity and prepare them for a greater sense of purpose and belonging. I love to note that these educators were focusing on reimagining education, not schools. Shujaa (1994) asserts that the U.S. school system provides a great deal of schooling, "a process intended to perpetuate and maintain the society's existing power relationships and the institutional structures that support those arrangements" (Shujaa, 1994, p. 15). Education, on the other hand, serves a different purpose for people of African descent. A Black or Afric/kan-centered education—as opposed to the United States schooling system—focuses on Identity, Purpose, and Direction (Madhubuti, 1979). In my work, I align Madhubuti's conceptual mapping of a Black education with the Past (Identity); Present (Purpose), and Future (Direction). Institution builders during the Black Arts and Black Power Movements, in my opinion, were futurists who were invested in cultivating Black children's autonomy beginning with self-love. I argue that these three tenants should remain at the center of a "Correct Black Education" or Afric/kan-centered education and this is where I also see many tensions (Madhubuti, 1979). I am not convinced that this can be done in schools as they are currently configured. This is why my previous questions, "What is the future of Black children in schools?" and "What is the future of educating Black children?" were insufficient. Black children, their families, and educators who are already engaged in this work should have access to foresight and futures-making tools so they can do this work themselves. I am also not convinced this should be the work of schools; as a former English teacher and current teacher educator, I know that schools immerse themselves too deeply in the minutia, operations, and lists of things "to do" that actually have little to do with education and relationships.

I opened this essay with a forecast for the year 2032. A forecast is not a prediction for some apocalyptic look into an uncertain future but rather an opportunity to provide thought provoking possibilities so that we might prepare for the futures. Former Executive Director of the Institute for the Future (IFF), Bob Johansen (2007) explains that:

A forecast doesn't need to come true to be worthwhile. A forecast should provoke new thought: new insights, new possible actions, or new ways of thinking about the present. You don't need to agree with a forecast to find it useful. (p. 16)

Businesses have engaged in foresight work for decades. The Institute for the Future, for example, was established in 1968 and has leveraged the foresight cycle—foresight, insight, and action to generate plans for productivity and success (p. 10). All of these tools help stakeholders "get there early," to prepare for "seeing a possible future before others see it" (Johansen, 2007, p. 3). After my own training in foresight methodologies (where I was one of two

educators among executives of large corporations, fashion retail groups, and tech/multi-media organizations that permeate human lives on a global scale, I sought to understand the potential of forecasting and futures thinking as a part of transformative justice education. I conceptualized four pedagogical stances—*History Matters*, *Race Matters*, *Justice Matters*, *Language Matters* (Winn, 2018)—from research examining the contours of restorative justice efforts both in schools and in out-of-school settings. Later, I argued that a fifth stance—*Futures Matter*—worked in tandem with the others with a keen eye toward how histories and futures should be leveraged in equity work in education (Winn, 2019, 2021a, 2021b).

Informed by futurist thinking and Afrofuturism theory, the *Futures Matter* pedagogical stance attempts to reshape how histories and futures inform each other and provide intersectional learning opportunities. The initial four pedagogical stances, *History Matters*, *Race Matters*, *Justice Matters*, *Language Matters* were created to prepare minds for restorative and, ultimately, transformative justice work. Preparing one’s mind is central to foresight work. Many school systems miss the opportunities to make restorative justice impactful for generations of students because of their rush to practice. But restorative justice is not only a practice. It is, crucially, a paradigm shift. Thus, restorative practices, even in some of the best scenarios and with some of the best intentions, often reproduce inequities as they rely on the labor of women and people of color and/or underpaid staff members.

Castle, Nia, Zarah, and Zion are the future and the now. Their characters emerge from my own research and, more specifically, the Historiography for the Future project which includes examining Independent Black Schools, or IBIs, founded in the late 1960s to serve Black children and their families. While many IBIs started as a reaction to what was often referred to as “miseducation” in U.S. schools (Fisher, 2009), they began to map out their own curriculum and define their purpose for education as it pertained to Black life and Black futures. On a personal note, my mother, the late Cheryl Ann Fisher, an institution builder and co-founder, with my father, of Shule Jumamose—a Black Community School in Sacramento, California—used the expression “I have eyes in the back of my head” when I was a child. While the expression ticked me, knowing she was paying attention to the details of her children’s lives even when we didn’t realize it provided great comfort to me.

When Maisie Gholson and I collaborated on a project entitled “Transformative Justice Teacher Education,” at the Transformative Justice in Education (TJE) Center which I co-founded and co-direct with Lawrence “Torry” Winn, we discovered a passion for forecasting Black lives. We exchanged one of my forecasts and one of her provocations on Black girl brilliance that challenged the punitive mathematics classroom. This work led to a shared vision in which we engage futures work to consider how Black children and their families can become agents of their collective futures. Our programs of research speak to the desires of Black parents like Nia and Castle Jackson—as well as their children—who deserve to have learning communities that cultivate joy, intellectual engagement, and inquiry. It is this vision that both anchors and catapults the visionary work in this special issue of *Journal of Futures Studies*.

## Acknowledgements

All the contributors, including myself, are indebted to Dr. Adam D. Musser who served as an editor with a sharp eye for the details.

## References

- Bowser, B. P. (Summer 1976). Black people and the future: A summary of the major trends. *Black Books Bulletin*, 4(2): 6-10.
- Dumas, M. J. (2014). ‘Losing an arm’: Schooling as a site of black suffering. *Race, Ethnicity and Education*, 17(1): 1-29. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13613324.2013.850412>
- Fisher, M. T. (2009). *Black literate lives: Historical and contemporary perspectives*. Routledge.
- Johansen, B. (2007). *Get there early: Sensing the future to compete in the present*. Berrett-Koehler Publishers Inc.
- Love, B. (2019). *We want to do more than survive: Abolitionist teaching and the pursuit of education freedom*. Beacon Press.
- Madhubuti, H. (1979). *From plan to planet life studies: The need for Afrikan minds and institutions*. Third World Press.
- Shujaa, M. J. (1994). *Too much schooling. Too little education: A paradox of Black life in White societies*. African

World Press.

- Tuck, E. (Fall 2009). Suspending damage: A letter to communities. *Harvard Educational Review*, 79(3): 409-428. <https://doi.org/10.17763/haer.79.3.n0016675661t3n15>
- Winn, M. T. (2018). *Justice on both sides: Toward a restorative justice discourse in schools*. Harvard Education Press.
- Winn, M. T. (2019). Paradigm shifting toward justice in teacher education. *TeachingWorks: University of Michigan*.
- Winn, M. T. (2021a). Futures matter: Creating just futures in the age of hyper-incarceration. *Peabody Journal of Education*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0161956X.2021.1991693>
- Winn, M. T. (2021b). Why futures matter: Toward a fifth pedagogical stance. In M. T. Winn & L. T. Winn (Eds.). *Restorative justice in education: Transforming teaching and learning through the disciplines*. (193-201). Harvard Education Press.