Article

Black on Black Futures: A Call to Diversify the Discipline of Black Futuring

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Abstract

The futures of Black people have been crafted without being at the table. Without the tools to read and forecast the future, Black communities are left reacting to, rather than planning and preparing for, the future. When we understand how important it is for Black people specifically, and marginalized peoples generally, to have the expertise to read the past in a way that reveals the future, we will put as much emphasis on Black futures as we do on Black history. Unevenly distributing the tools to curate the future, locks trends of an unjust past into patterns of future injustice.

Positionality

Several years ago, I was invited by the Institute for the Future to observe a conversation about the Future of Climate Change with an interdisciplinary group of leaders working to address the crisis. At the time I had not been introduced to strategic forecasting, though I had been involved in strategic planning processes spanning over 30 years in education, arts, and youth development. I was there as an artist recognized for my own social design experiments, often with young people at the center. In this way I was an Afrofuturist with a fascination for youth development, education, and the power of art.

I was struck by the list of who had been invited to participate in this conversation. Guests included representatives from foreign countries including China and Canada, members of the U.S. State Department, leaders of municipalities, banks, technology companies, corporations, universities, and a few climate activists, most of whom were using alternative technologies to confront or reveal climate realities. They were all impressive, representing interests that had outsized economic stakes in the conversation. Some of them were being introduced to foresight, creating forecasts about an issue they all shared in common and were committed to.

I was also struck by who was not in the room. No Indigenous people from around the world, no Island folks, no one from Africa or the Caribbean, no Black mothers or grandmothers, no poor people, no youth, and no one in the room to point out this absence other than me and a small group of like-minded artists who had been invited to listen, and observe, rather than to participate. The absence of these worldviews made the conversations hyperbolic and harmful. I observed entire communities being left out of the conversation. I witnessed futures being written that did not include entire histories that were directly impacted by the climate crisis. It was as if the future being crafted in Silicon Valley that spring day only included those who were present in the room and those they represented. My observations are not meant as a critique of IFTF, whose work I respect deeply. Nor to diminish the value of the invited guests as contributors to a conversation about the future of the world. I recognized that day, and every day since in my futures journey, that the presence of voice and perspective is a privilege. Non-inclusive histories lead to non-inclusive futures. If you are not at the table, you might be on the table.

That is the risk of unevenly distributing the tools to curate the future, locking trends of an unequal and unjust past into patterns of future injustice. These tools were designed primarily to help companies, organizations, and

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governments become more resilient in the face of uncertainty, more prepared to deal with the unpredictable and sometimes volatile nature of a capitalistic future. Fortune 500 companies, technology companies, governments, militaries, and data scientists have been empowered to use these tools for the past 50 years in a rush toward modernity, and in an effort to sustain themselves. Sustainability has meant maintaining systems no matter who they harm, reinforcing practices that negatively impact communities – often because they were not at the table when the policies were drawn, not in the conversation when this present was forecast.

This is an example of how the futures of marginalized communities have been crafted without being at the table. Those who need to be the most resilient in the face of crisis are often the least equipped to do so. This paper is concerned with the future of Black people specifically. Without the tools to read and forecast the future, Black communities are left reacting to, rather than planning and preparing for, these futures.

Who Gets to Forecast the Future?

Most futurists are ignorant of the history of Black people. This ignorance leads to significant gaps in their forecasts about the future. Many experts in reading and simulating the future are ignorant of Black history, and experts in Black history are often ignorant to the practices of forecasting and designing the future. When we understand how important it is for Black people to have the expertise to read the past in a way that reveals the future, we will put as much emphasis on Black futures as we do on Black history.

Forecasting is the practice of identifying a clear and detailed vision of the future based on a critical and insightful analysis of the past and present. Forecasting is about interrogating the present and past to get a sense of future possibility, recognizing that clarity about the past and present make more accurate forecasts tangible. A forecast is a vision of possibility, with recognition of the seen and unseen forces that determine the future (Johansen, 2020).

Strategic Forecasting is a professional practice designed to help organizations become more resilient. Rather than a game of prediction, forecasting presents scenarios based on plausible realities as provocations for those engaged in reading the world to know the future. Scenarios present opportunities for people to engage in new ideas, to learn what they would not know unless they had the context and experience. Forecasting is a practice that is used by meteorologists to predict storms, including the speed and direction of their travel; by climate scientists to understand potential climate catastrophes and how to mitigate or prevent them; and by a host of other industries and professions to get a read on the future. Forecasting has proven to be a significant tool in building resilience for institutions and organizations (Johansen, 2020).

Forecasting is not an uncommon everyday practice. Parents of children engage in forecasting, often employing a back casting or a "future back" thinking process to shepherd their babies to and through the "right" schools that eventually get them into elite colleges. Middle and high school students are expected to forecast four years through high school and often set the benchmarks necessary to accomplish goals that are three or four years into the future. In some African American families, forecasting is employed when parents engage in "the talk" with their children about what "might" happen "if" they encounter police, with explicit instructions about how to speak, act, and behave. These informal practices are often done in the interest of the institutions they serve – or, in the latter case, in the interest of saving a child's life – rather than as an intentional technique to curate the future.

Many of the technological advancements we depend on, like cellular phones, personal computers, and automated devices, were forecast long before they became a reality. Scenarios of global pandemics, nuclear war, and pandemics have been simulated by armed forces, industries, and governments for decades. Professional Futurists are experts in gathering signals, using them to identify trends in the past, imagining future possibilities, and creating ways for people to engage these possible futures as tools of provocation, planning, and critical thinking. They become tools to prompt people to respond to future possibility. Despite their expertise, when George Floyd was murdered by police in 2020, these futurists were just as surprised as the rest of white America about the blatant racism, police violence, rioting in the streets, and demands to defund law enforcement. These professional forecasters who were trained to read signals and imagine future possibilities completely missed this moment.

There are several ironies about this reality, including the fact that African American families have been forecasting moments like Derick Chauvin taking George Floyd's life for generations, playing out scenarios at dinner tables across the country. I am 52 years old, and my parents had "the talk" with me, even though they had never received advanced training in strategic forecasting. The idea of #defundthepolice and investing those resources in

youth development, mental health, education, and employment was advanced by the Black Panther Party for Self Defense in Oakland, California, in 1968. In that same year the Institute for the Future, one of the oldest non-profit futurist think tanks in the world, was founded in Silicon Valley.

Another irony of serendipity is how much the volatility of this current moment and its associated uncertainty is the result of forecasts built on the idea of endless profit, endless growth, and hyper industrialization. The work of *futuring* over the past five decades has contributed to many of the problems that people today are fighting against. Strategic Forecasting has been a treasured and coveted practice helping to maintain the white capitalist anti-Black social order (Bledsoe & Wright, 2018). Black Futurity, though postulated through the lens of white history, is for Black people, an example of the maturation of Black philosophy to challenge white world views and affirm cultural purpose and pan-African identity (Brooks et al, 2019).

As long as futurists are crafting futures that impact Black futures, those futures will be anti-Black unless they include the voices and perspectives of Black people in their design and in their execution. Before these professional futurists begin to forecast on Black future possibility, several questions need to be addressed: How equipped are white futurists to forecast futures for Black people? How have their forecasts reproduced harm for Black communities? What role has future forecasting played in maintaining systems of racial injustice, projecting the inequities of the past and present into the future? What might future speculation by Black people look like?

> Amara's three laws of futures (Amara, 1991): (i) the future is not predetermined, (ii) the future is not predictable, and (iii) the future outcomes can be influenced by our choices in the present. (Crews, 2019)

Black Optimism: Visions of the Afro Future

As a general rule, to get an accurate read of the future it is suggested to look at least twice as far back as you look forward in time. Thus, reading history is a requirement for accurately reading the future (Amara,1991; Crews, 2019; Johansen, 2020). It's no wonder professional futurists were unable to forecast the aftermath of the murder of George Floyd, because without a clear and open view of African American History, it was impossible for them to imagine the reality we see today. Without a clear view of history, it was a future they were not equipped to read. Every day Black people were better equipped to forecast the future of their communities (and perhaps other futures) than the professional futurists who were trained yet unable to see.

It is my contention that Black futurity exists along a continuum from Afro Futurism to Afro Pessimism. Afro futurists operate in opposition to notions of omnitemporal perpetual anti-Blackness as articulated by Womack (2013) and Winchester (2019). Afro Futurism is a rebuke of the pessimism born from centuries of losing, and the limited possibility offered in the language and lens used to envision the past, present and future. Afro Futurists lean heavily on the example set by dreamers in the continuing African American struggle for humanity (Kelley, 2002). These dreamers, though calculated in their pursuit of Black futures, used foresight to build resilient pathways to freedom without a clear vision of what freedom was, where it lived, how it was expressed, or even what it truly meant to be free. Even if they were looking through a lens that allowed them to see generations ahead, they would have witnessed their children and children's children hanging from trees, being murdered by mobs, and being incarcerated and brutalized by police. This is not to disparage their vision, or the steps they took toward a Black future. It is to say that the effort to arrive at collective freedom requires many steps, and without the benefit of strategy, the road can be longer than it should.

> *"Faith is taking the first step even when you don't see the whole staircase"*
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> *– Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., September 12, 1962, at the Park Sheraton Hotel*

Dr. King spoke of the power of optimism and its role in working to build Black futures. Every step is an expression of intent to accomplish something imagined, something speculated, a freedom that had yet to be experienced. Harriet Tubman ran to a freedom she had never seen, with a faith that she would see it. Perhaps like Mama Harriet and Dr. King we recognize that freedom is a speculation, and that it never really is freedom unless it is freedom for all of us.

I am not speaking of an ambiguous "us," some imposed identity on people whose skin is the same color as mine.

When I speak of us, I speak of we who are anti-racist, anti-colonial, anti-imperial "rememberers" of our ancestors, what happened to them, what was done to them, and what was left for them. The "us" I speak of are united in our rejection of the One World View and the hegemony of European models and ideas as a universal standard for all humanity. This is not ambiguous, this is the us who are rooted in history, and an intergenerational culture of resistance.

Afro Pessimism: Visions of an Anti Future

Not all future theory emerging from Black scholarship is optimistic. As a people, we know we are hunted by sharks, who prey first on the weak among us with hopes of capturing and destroying the strong. When we realize we are under attack we often form a bait ball, collapsing in on ourselves for protection, pushed to the surface by the large fish and attacked from the top by predatory birds. Without a clear vision for escape, we become victims of our own circumstances, and our efforts to defend ourselves become a part of our liability. In this instance it is hard to come up with a plan to thrive. In fact, under these conditions and the weight of it all it is much easier to lose hope in the future and just submit to the positionality of food.

There are strong Afro Pessimistic visions and critiques of the future. Here is Frank Wilkerson III (2020), preeminent voice in the scholarship:

> Because one can be seduced into holding beacons of a nauseating we-are-the-world hope for the future. And the redemptive denouement of White transformation will eclipse the *longue durée* of Black suffering. One starts believing in the redemption of the future the way one believes in a redeeming god. And one forgets that the future is what happens when one is not Black. (p. 50)

This modern future, the so-called progress of "humanity" itself, and western civilization is dependent on an attitude of redemption. Illogical hope in an unseen and redemptive spirit is what fuels dependence on nation states and corporations to address climate catastrophe. It is hope in redemption that fuels people as they await indictments against murderous police officers.

Just as it is hope in redemption that Black parents continue to send their children to schools that fail them and undermine their future (Dumas, 2016; Weathersby & Davis, 2019). Our futures cannot belong to us if we do not craft them, or if they are crafted subject to possibilities offered exclusively under anti-Black epistemologies. According to a 2017-2018 US Department of Education National Teacher and Principal Survey, almost 80% of the public school teachers and 85% of private school teachers are white (Will, 2020). Alongside this single fact, coupled with the $23 million deficit in spending for predominantly Black schools relative to those that are predominantly white, we see evidence of how anti-Blackness is perpetuated, afro pessimism informed, and inequities curated into the future (Meckler, 2019).

These parents demonstrate an optimism about the redemptive power of education both for the educated and for the educator. Many teachers are inspired to make a difference in the lives of those less fortunate than them. Many Black students are convinced that by working hard and following the rules they can overcome anti-Blackness, defy the odds, and be educated into freedom. The system thrives on the optimism of all who participate in its operation. When each of these employees from the custodian to the principal arrive at work, their sense of optimism and possibility is assumed. Educational institutions are built on the backs of anti-Black optimism.

Optimism has not led to better outcomes for African American students in US schools. It has not led to higher reading and math scores, higher levels of literacy, or increased the wealth and economic power of African American communities (Finkel, 2010). This optimism has not led to more just police practices, equitable legislative policies, or equal opportunities. Reading these signals, it shouldn't be a surprise that in response to this anti-Blackness, scholars and activists have begun to call for school abolition (Marie & Watson, 2020; Stovall, 2018)

School abolition is neither a reprimand, nor a radical idea without merit in real data. One need only look at reading levels for 3rd and 4th graders around the country as measured by promoters of schooling, especially of Black children, to understand how destructive schooling has been and will continue to be for Black futures. The consistent gaps in health, wealth and prosperity between races serves as testimony to the outcomes of schools, and the fact of persistent Black underachievement in these systems. In a system designed to fail these children, the measures used to evaluate their progress will be reflectively flawed. Compulsory schooling is a soft guarantee at

indoctrination, and in many places a carefully constructed strategy to control the future of Black people. Through under- or mis-education, incarceration, and criminalization, labeling and categorization, and a host of other well documented strategies, systems have been instituted that cripple Black families for multiple generations (Dumas, 2016; Jung & Vargas, 2021)

Anti-Black systems have been instituted that funnel Black children into specific pathways for future possibility, which wholly depend on subjective grades they receive from their teachers and scores on culturally biased exams that test information they have often not been exposed to. Anti-Black gates have been established to determine percentages of Black populations that will receive opportunities to become citizens, and those who will be surveilled and incarcerated to become non-citizens. These anti-Black gates certify a large minority for low skill low wage jobs, and a small minority for high skill high wage jobs. There are not many off ramps other than joining the military, becoming a police officer, or "making it" as an entertainer. Even those off ramps are funnels into systems dominated by anti-Black sentiments.

This puts a limitation on future imaginaries for Black people. It is easy to become pessimistic under these conditions, or any of the conditions Black people have had to contend with over the past 400 years. The implications for any vision of the future of Black people carries with it the patterns, trends, and drivers of this past. Looking twice as far back to look forward implies that we need to look at least 200 years forward to get beyond the legacy of what many Black people consider to be a holocaust.

Implications of a Speculative Afro Future

One critical pathway for future studies is to understand and interrogate the longstanding relationship between the project for modernity and the dehumanization of African people. More specifically, how have conceptions, forecasts, and projections of the future been built on ideas that are fundamentally anti-Black? This is not only to suggest that these futures carry with them the rampant inequities and lack of critical racial analysis that is required to understand the present context. Anti-Blackness in the futures space serves to preserve colonial ideologies and epistemologies into the future, sustaining the anti-Blackness that fuels it.

This interrogation cannot happen in a vacuum, as understanding the future requires an analysis of the past. Questions the field must ask include: How have futurists and strategic forecasters been trained to include or exclude pluriversal ideas? Whose future is being forecast and what positionalities are maintained from the present that privileges the forecasters themselves? If the forecasters have been educated in systems informed by the persistence of colonial ideologies, practices and frameworks, how can they not carry anti-Blackness with them into their projections of the future?

There are countless examples in African American history of how anti-Black pasts inform anti-Black futures. One need only look at the criminal justice system in relation to Black people, beginning with fugitive slave catchers, former confederate soldiers and Klan members who at different times in history joined police forces and helped embed racial injustice into the system itself. We must include in this analysis a critical examination of the 14th Amendment and the creation of convict leasing, debt slavery, and mass incarceration to historically institutionalize an anti-Black justice system (Alexander, 2011).

One could examine the education system and its deliberate under-resourcing of education for Black children helping to maintain generational wealth and educational inequity. This includes the pre-*Brown v. Board* realities of unabated white terror, and legalized efforts to institutionalize inequality, to the post-*Brown* of massive resistance, under-resourcing of predominantly Black schools, and the under-employment of Black teachers. The public and private school system are tools that have been integral to the maintenance of cultural and racial hegemony in the United States. Anti-Blackness is a soft-spoken pillar of school discipline, management, and funding policies across the country; it operates hand in hand with Eurocentric disinformation campaigns designed to obscure or diminish the contribution of African and African American people to American history (Dumas, 2016; Love, 2019; Weathersby & Davis, 2019).

It is impossible to address the future of any of these systems without examining their current outcomes and the history behind the policies that have shaped them. Without an interrogation of their racialized pasts, it is impossible to contextualize their current racialized outcomes or implications into the future. Without a clear analysis of race and its impact on the past, it is impossible to have a clear lens on the future.

Additional questions that futurists and forecasters need to address include: Who should be charged with forecasting futures for Black people? Is it possible to decouple anti-Blackness with modernity or the practice of futuring? How are we who are products of anti-Black education, theories and frameworks able to forecast futures for Black people? What is the Future of Anti-Blackness?

Conclusion

The crafting of official futures, that is those sanctioned, commissioned, and strategically achieved, has been the domain of agents and individuals whose interest does not explicitly include Black people. These tools and processes that have been used to maintain white economic and governmental hegemony were crafted by people who had little to no understanding, interest, or background in the history of Black people. Epistemologically speaking, it is critical in the strategic crafting of foreseeable futures for Black people that interdisciplinary groups of Afro futurists operate from a paradigm for education beyond cages. In this there can be no expectation of redemption from the state, or other parties guilty of deleterious acts against Black people. Rather redemption must come from the community itself, and future generations who commit to the future.

If the future of a Black body in a slave ship can only be allowed to conceive of freedom inside the boat, the body will in fact spend its short life in that boat. They will be able to imagine the past, but not able to imagine the present or future without the boat and that vast ocean providing the limit of possibility. There can be no expectation of redemption from the ship's captain or crew. Rather redemption must come from either from the waves below, or in the speculation of future generations who persevere. Somewhere in between is the possibility of a future. The future is in survival.

In consideration of the future, it is critical for Black people that the future is a part of our conceptual and intellectual playground. It is important that if a future exists for Black people the hope and prayer for such a reality be matched with intentionality and foresight. Leaving our future up to the forces of anti-Blackness or the pessimism it engenders would be detrimental to the Afro Future dream of freedom.

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