



Article

Un-silenced Pasts Present in Afrofutures: The Potential of Arts-based Inquiry and Critical Race Theory

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Abstract

This essay discusses why the ability to envision unimagined solutions is necessary when considering future possibilities in Black education and the use of comics in classrooms. Two alternative futures are proposed. They are guided by cyclical events, inspired by past and present Black achievements, and informed by the collective harms inflicted on Black citizens in the past and present. A significant portion of each alternative future speculates on uncertainties introduced by other variables and trends that must be considered due to their potential influences on Black education and comics. It concludes with two comics about Black comic conventions in 2037.

Keywords

Afrofuturism, Comics, Black Education, Graphic Narratives, Graphic Novels

Introduction

The ability to envision alternative futures is a universal need (Hawken et al., 1982; Johansen, 2017). This is an especially necessary activity for the African diaspora. It enables them to persist after centuries of tyranny despite ongoing efforts to silence and trivialize Black historical perspectives and achievements (Trouillot, 1995). This imaginative capacity is borne out of extant creative energies from numerous African sources and passed down in various forms to each new generation. The imagined futures that African ancestors shared with one another were linked to their past and present. Cultural histories, folktales, myths, and songs educated the young and old on how their past decisions and present actions could influence their futures. Oral storytelling through griots served as an early medium through which our progenitors had these experiences (Hale, 1997). Iterations of these experiences are available in contemporary mediums such as novels (Atkinson, 2011), comics (Fitzgerald, 1988), and interactive computational narratives (Harrell, 2005). As noted by Atkinson (2011), “the fictive narrative itself bears the tradition of griot because it educates, entertains and performs rituals and traditions of culture. It is through the narrative griot that the African American people are created and sustained” (para. 2). These narrative traditions persist in the Afrofuturism movement (Dery, 1994). Nelson (2002) writes: “Afrofuturism can be broadly defined as ‘African American voices’ with ‘other stories to tell about culture, technology and things to come.’”

This article considers these matters within the context of comics as an extension of these storytelling traditions. It also explores the role comics as vehicles of Afrofuturism might play as pedagogical tools. I discuss the role comics have played in Black entertainment and education in past U.S. contexts, I explore how they are currently used as instructional resources, and I craft scenario-based forecasts that consider how they may be used in the future to draw these connections.

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Black in the Past

Black artistry in the U.S. began with enslaved populations who were kidnapped from various West African tribes well known for their artistry. Many enslaved Africans were portraitists, painters, sculptors, draftsmen, artisans, and craftsmen. Their artwork “was the evolutionary product of centuries of tradition which later came to be appropriately called, ‘The Ancestral Arts’” (Newton, 1977, p.36). Enslavers received all credit for this artwork during the antebellum period. However, Newton (1977) writes that “[the enslaved artists’] creativity and cleverness laid the foundation and provided the roots for furthering the development of the Afro-American artist” (p. 41).

Once freed, formerly enslaved artists continued producing artworks. Historical records indicate that “America’s first-known black artist … was active from 1790 to 1825” (Bryan & Torchia, 1996, p. 3). He was a formerly enslaved man named Joshua Johnson. Likewise, the first African American political cartoonist was a formerly enslaved artist named Henry Jackson Lewis. “Despite a blinded left eye and a disabled left arm, Lewis educated himself and then learned to draw and sketch” (Taylor, 2014, p. 198). His earliest works were published in multiple Arkansas newspapers in the 1870s, most notably *The Freeman*:

As the only black-owned illustrated newspaper, [Edward Elder Cooper’s] *The Freeman* was the sole site of resistance to the American visual war on the image of its black citizens—the plethora of abject caricatures of African Americans printed, published, and widely disseminated by publishers like Currier and Ives, *Harper’s Weekly*, *Frank Leslie’s Illustrated*, *Judge*, *Puck*, *Life*, and others. (Taylor, 2014, p. 200)

These extraordinary artists are a sampling of unrecognized Americans who should be studied in U.S. classrooms. They are important reminders of a long history during which Black Americans actively overcame oppressive circumstances to achieve seemingly impossible accomplishments. Lewis’ creative works also serve as early examples of Black media that counter negative stereotypes about their communities. Forty-seven of Lewis’ original drawings can be viewed today at the DuSable Museum of African American History in Chicago, Illinois.

Many Black artists participated in the creation of mainstream and independent comics throughout U.S. history, yet their contributions are rarely discussed in the pages of twentieth century texts about this artform. For example, *The Smithsonian Collection of Newspaper Comics* (Blackbeard & Williams, 1978) and Sabin’s (1996) historical review of British and American comics make no mention of Black cartoonists. Notably, George Herriman (a multi-racial artist) is mentioned in both titles; however, the public was unaware of Herriman’s African ancestry because he passed for White (Amiran, 2000).

In the twentieth century, White American artists continued to publish comics that either excluded Black characters, placed them in marginal roles, or depicted them as villains, savages, or other stereotypes (Strömberg, 2003). Unbeknownst to the public, some Black artists accepted opportunities to supplement their incomes by illustrating a number of these comics (Amash & Nolen-Weathington, 2012; Quattro, 2020). Yet, like Henry Jackson Lewis, Black artists during this time also produced comics for Black publishers. These stories pushed back against negative depictions of Black people (Howard, 2017; Quattro, 2020). Comics from Black creators were strongly influenced by the social context in which they were produced and the experiences of individuals in their communities. Howard and Jackson (2013) offer comic artist Oliver ‘Ollie’ Harrington as an example:

Present during one of the most creative explosions up to that time in the midst of the Harlem Renaissance and with the complexity of everyday life in the most populous, as well as important, Black community in the US at the time, all Harrington said that he did was allow the city to provide his material. (p. 116)

His most popular comic *Dark Laughter* explored issues relating to racism and social injustice. It launched in 1935 and ran for almost three decades (Howard, 2017). Similarly, comics produced by Jackie Ormes (the first African American female cartoonist) were produced during the Chicago Black Renaissance. Her stories were inspired by experiences in Chicago’s Bronzeville neighborhood, a “cultural center of black America and … the new crucible for a black political power base” (Goldstein, 2019, p. 22). Goldstein (2019) explains that Ormes’ 1945 comic *Candy* “likely intended readers to make a connection between inequities of black servitude in white households and inequities in other aspects of American society” (p. 32). Her next comic *Patty-Jo ‘n’ Ginger* ran between 1945 and 1956 and it “depicted such things as music lessons, school graduation events, and leisurely

summer vacations, family activities that reflected Ormes's own class status, sending the message that these aspects of the good life were attainable by everyone" (Goldstein, 2019, p. 41).

Black comics producers recognized the educational potential of the medium. A successful example is the *Golden Legacy: Illustrated History Series* (Fitzgerald, 1988). Fitzgerald Publishing launched this series during the latter years of the civil rights movement and produced 16 comics about historical Black figures such as Toussaint L'Ouverture, Crispus Attucks, and Benjamin Banneker. Bertram Fitzgerald (the owner) produced these comics because Black heroes were absent in textbooks and educational comics. Leo Carty, the author and artist of the first volume of *Golden Legacy*, also worked as an illustrator for *Liberator* magazine, the self-described "voice of the Afro-American protest movement in the United States and the liberation movement of Africa" (quoted from their July 1964 issue's masthead) (Degand, 2021). He shared Fitzgerald's educational media goals and stated that he was especially motivated to produce the first comic because he wanted "to reach the young Black children of America with an accurate record of their history ... not only in the United States, but throughout the world" (WNYC, 1968). Fitzgerald initially encountered setbacks from potential investors who saw no value in Black history comics. Nevertheless, he formed a successful partnership with Coca-Cola in which they agreed to "print and distribute *Golden Legacy* to local schools, libraries, and African American organizations without charge" (Howard, 2017, p. 78). Over 25 million copies of these books have been sold and they are still available for purchase today (Fitzgerald Publishing Company, 2014).

Black in the Present

Most mainstream comics titles continue to be written and illustrated by White men. During the June months of 2014-2016, the percentages of Black creatives at the three largest comic book publishers were woefully low (see Table 1). Yet, more Black characters are now protagonists within these comics. Marvel and DC's oldest Black superheroes (Black Panther, Falcon, Luke Cage, Blade, Storm, Green Lantern, Black Lightning, and Cyborg) were reimagined for a new generation. New Black characters have been introduced (e.g., *The Walking Dead*'s Michonne, and DC's *Naomi*). And in other instances, Black characters take on monikers originally held by White characters (e.g., Spider-Man, Iron Man, Firestorm, and Aqualad). These characters are so successful they now appear in cartoons, television series, and movies.

Table 1: Percentage of Black creatives at the top 3 comics publishers (Hanley, 2016)

Publisher	2014 (%)	2015 (%)	2016 (%)
DC Comics	1.1	2.7	1.0
Marvel Comics	1.3	3.4	6.0
Image Comics	1.6	4.2	4.6

Fortunately, the number of comics produced by independent Black creatives has increased in recent decades. Morrie Turner led the way with 49 years of *Wee Pals* comic strips until he passed away in 2014 (GoComics, 2017). Ray Billingsley's *Curtis*, Stephen Bentley's *Herb and Jamaal*, and Robb Armstrong's *Jump Start* are additional examples that were launched over 30 years ago and are still in syndication. Aaron McGruder's *The Boondocks* launched a decade later and was reimagined as a cartoon in 2005.

Comparatively, the number of independent Black superhero comic book titles began to surge alongside the increasing popularity and visibility of hip-hop culture. *Brotherman*, *Purge*, and *Static* are notable examples from the 1990s that are still published today. The crowdsourcing platform Kickstarter, numerous online print-on-demand services, and multiple annual Black comic book conventions contribute to the growing list of current titles, such as

DMC, *Is 'Nana the Were-Spider, Niobe, and Witchdoctor*. Additionally, several independent Black artists have won Eisner awards (“the ‘Oscars’ of the comic book industry” [Comic-Con International: San Diego, 2021, para. 1]). A number of creators have also received other prestigious honors. For example, Darrin Bell won the 2019 Pulitzer Prize for editorial cartooning (Pulitzer, 2021) and Jerry Craft became the first graphic novelist to win a Newberry Medal (de León, 2020).

The growing popularity of comics has reminded publishers and teachers of their educational potential. Comics are increasingly used as effective multimodal instructional resources and as innovative modes of student assessments (Bitz, 2010, 2020; Degand, 2020; Kirtley et al., 2020). There is a wide assortment of comics on various subjects, such as computer programming (Yang & Holmes, 2019), history (Gonick, 2006), and hypercapitalism (Gonick & Kasser, 2018). When students are also asked to create comics, these assignments can help them form multiliterate understandings of educational material (New London Group, 1996).

Nevertheless, research shows that pre-service and in-service teachers need introductory and ongoing training on how to best use comics in their classrooms (Bitz, 2010, 2020; Kirtley et al., 2020). They are often concerned about grading students’ comics submissions because artistic talent varies greatly amongst students and educators. This concern is especially relevant because art instruction is not expected in non-arts courses. In response, arts-based inquiry (Kraehe & Brown, 2011) is recommended because it is a mode of evaluation that does not focus on students’ artistic abilities. Kraehe and Brown (2011) define arts-based inquiry as “an interactive, reflexive practice of problem finding and problem solving, that is, artmaking as a form of re-search” (p. 490-491). This approach helps teachers appreciate student artwork without grading them on their creative talents. Instead, students are graded on their knowledge and the messages they communicate.

Black history is also presented in comic books. *Nat Turner*, *The Life of Frederick Douglass*, and *The Black Panther Party: A Graphic Novel History* are examples of non-fiction comics written and illustrated by Black creatives. Black achievements on the national political stage inspired comics about President Barack Obama (Marriotte, 2009; Ward, 2009) and Vice President Kamala Harris (Frizell, 2020, 2021). Yet, educational comics are not immune to the same biases that negatively impact entertainment media experiences. In addition to understanding how to use comics in classrooms, K-16 educators must also learn how to navigate discussions about intersecting forms of discrimination.

Yosso (2002) warns: “racism, as well as gender- and class-based oppression, in the United States is perpetuated in the form of entertainment media” (p. 52). She recommends the use of a Critical Race Theory (CRT) lens during media consumption because it “challenge[s] students to critically ‘read’ the racism, sexism, and classism in entertainment media” (p. 54). The CRT movement was started by legal scholars and activists during the 1970s when implicit forms of discrimination were increasingly contributing to the erosion of numerous civil rights era advancements (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Its proponents eschew incremental progress, systemic biases, and colorblindness. Instead, they demand more immediate and honest advancements towards equity, and are “engaged in studying and transforming the relationship among race, racism, and power” (p. 3). Their work is undergirded by several tenets: that race is a social construct; that privileged groups receive material and psychic benefits from the multiple intersecting implicit and explicit forms of discrimination they enable; and that counterstories from marginalized communities challenge the harmful stereotypes caused by social essentialism. In solidarity with critical scholars and activists, a new Black Speculative Arts Movement (BSAM) currently promotes a politically engaged Afrofuturism 2.0, in which:

Future-looking Black scholars, artists, and activists are not only reclaiming their right to tell their own stories, but also to critique the European/American digerati class of their narratives about cultural others, past, present and future and, challenging their presumed authority to be the sole interpreters of Black lives and Black futures. (Anderson, 2016, p. 228)

This can complement arts-based inquiry assignments during which “students are not just ‘doing art’; rather, they employ aesthetic processes to examine, uncover, and voice new, more complex knowledge around the sociocultural with a critical perspective in mind” (Kraehe & Brown, 2011, p. 507).

Black in the Future

Constructing scenarios

When constructing scenarios about Black education and the use of comics in classrooms, I am methodologically guided by futurist scholars. Schoemaker (1993) defines scenarios as “*focused descriptions of fundamentally different futures presented in coherent script-like or narrative fashion* [italics in original]” (p. 195) and explains that their “focus is on learning and exploring interrelationships among trends and key uncertainties” (p. 194). Like Hawken et al. (1982), my aim is “to project alternative futures so that responsible and intelligent choice is possible” (p. 5). My forecasts conclude in 2038 because Dorr (2017) warns that speculations beyond 15-20 years into the future “typically fail to recognize the full implications of accelerating growth of information technology and the technological change it catalyzes” (p. 322).

I do not offer predictions, nor do I describe utopian possibilities, on the futures of Black education. Instead, I seek to present two futures that are plausible, provocative, and relevant, as requested by the general rules of forecasting (Johansen, 2017). The crafted futures I share are terrestrial, guided by cyclical events, and inspired by historical and current Black achievements. While recognizing that many citizens, politicians, and educators publicly desire futures in which educational experiences are much improved for Black students, I also consider how fallacies can block us from achieving our goals. Milojević (2021) warns us that individuals often behave irrationally and illogically even when they are aware of what is necessary for optimal outcomes (e.g., when smokers are surprised after developing smoking-related illnesses). Dorr (2017) asks futurists to beware of (1) assumptions that futures will be linear extensions of the past, (2) analyses that focus solely on changes in one variable while all else in society remains stable, and (3) depictions of futures as static moments on the timeline.

My approach to selecting the variables and trends that power my scenario-based forecasts are guided by Hawken et al.’s (1982) methods during their construction of seven scenarios for the future. They developed a list of relevant variables and then narrowed their focus by identifying driving trends that encompassed most of their list. Next, they determined the preconditions that framed the context of their scenarios. Afterward, they reflected on uncertainties that existed amongst their trends and considered a spectrum of optimistic and pessimistic outcomes.

For my scenarios, I compiled a list of relevant variables that can influence the future of Black education, multimodal pedagogies, and the comics medium, as displayed in Figure 1 and Figure 2 below. These variables are inspired by academic literature and my personal experiences as an educator and media producer. Next, I identified the economy, education, media, technology, and values (sociocultural and personal) as five driving trends throughout the variables (Figures 1-2). Finally, I reflected on the uncertainties they each present, and I analyzed the interactions that could occur amongst them between now and 2038.

driving trends	overlapping trends	Variables for Constructing the Future scenarios
climate		climate and environmental concerns
climate	economy	governmental policies focusing on climate
climate		increasing number of natural disasters (hurricanes, droughts, tsunamis, fires, etc...)
climate		weather patterns
comics		general social attitudes toward comic books and their content
comics		research on comics use in classrooms
comics		research on multimodal education
comics		student psychographics towards comics
comics	economy	valuation of comic book investments
comics		comic book conventions
economy	climate	aftermath of natural disasters on the economies of the world
economy		attitudes and opinions about capitalism
economy		digital currencies
economy		economic expansions
economy		economic recessions
economy		unemployment rates
economy		governmental policies and laws concerning cryptocurrency
economy		invest portfolios
economy		physical currency
economy	media	payment systems
economy	education	school endowments
education		educaion policy
education		educational cultures
education		educational leaders goals
education		educational leadership programs
education		educational media trends
education	comics	educators' attitudes and opinions towards comics
education		history curricula
education		law enforcement on and off campus
education		racial climate in school contexts
education		student demographics
education		student performances
education		teachers education programs

Fig. 1: Variables and driving trends guiding both scenarios (1/2)

driving trends	overlapping trends	Variables for Constructing the Future scenarios
education		undergraduate education courses
education	media	online education
education		asynchronous education
education		synchronous education
education		academic conferences
education	media	hybrid instructional experiences
education	values	department of education
education		Black students' experiences
education		Black educators' experiences
education		educators' demographics
media		educators' psychographics towards media technologies
media		media content
media		media technologies
media		social media trends
media		students' psychographics towards media technologies
media		Internet of Things
media		internet
media		cloud computing
media		GPS
values		attitudes toward and and opinions of immigrants
values		attitudes toward and and opinions of individuals from different socioeconomic circumstances
values		attitudes toward and and opinions of technologies
values	climate	attitudes toward and opinions about global warming
values		nation's psychographics towards Black communities
values		political leanings
values	economy	attitudes and opinions about cryptocurrencies
values	media	sports
values	media	religious institutions
values	economy	grant-funding organizations
values		laws
values	economy	philanthropy
values	media	social movements
values	economy	social inequities

Fig. 2: Variables and driving trends guiding both scenarios (2/2)

The following sections consider future possibilities in which a combination of undesirable and encouraging outcomes coexist. Each scenario examines an alternative future with several uncertainties concerning the education of Black youth and the usage of comics as educational resources. They also share several conditions. The social inequities of the past and present persist—for example, elite schooling systems were originally built to serve wealthy White families and continue to do so today (Chetty et al., 2017; Neklason, 2019). There is no evidence to suggest that this will change in 20 years. Furthermore, economic inequality exists across races but it is also present within each ethnoracial group. Unequal levels of income and wealth have long contributed to the differences in quality of life for Black communities across the socioeconomic spectrum (Shihadeh & Steffensmeier, 1994; Clerge, 2019). These inequities will persist in both scenarios.

Scenario 1: A politically progressive future

A progressive Democratic president and vice president sit in the White House in 2038. They are in the second term of a federal administration that is led by two women for the first time in U.S. history. The election of a Black female president and a Latina vice president in 2032 was in direct response to the previous 8 years during which a Republican became the first White female U.S. president. She chose a White male as her vice president. Former-President Biden's years in office were more progressive than past administrations. This led to a strong resurgence from Republicans who sought to regain control of a country they no longer recognized.

Two factors played a major role in why Vice President Kamala Harris did not have enough votes to win the 2024 election. First, Democratic voters were negatively impacted in disproportionate numbers by laws passed to regulate existing voting options and new voting technologies that had been introduced before the election. Second, Democratic voters became complacent and did not anticipate a large wave of votes from Republicans in 2024. VP Harris lost once again in the 2028 election after her campaign's moderately Left strategy failed to inspire voters. The Democratic Party embraced a progressive platform for 2032 and won the election in a landslide. They repeated in 2036. After multiple years during which several states had extended voting rights to 16- and 17-year-olds, those demographics gained their right to vote at the federal level right before the 2036 elections. Currently, Democrats hold a majority of legislative seats and are successfully implementing numerous policies that the increasingly progressive U.S. electorate approves.

The comics industry is experiencing a renaissance period during which diverse sets of narratives are produced and distributed for older media and newer technologies. This renaissance is positively influencing and inspiring the experiences and portfolios of students in postsecondary arts programs. Digital comics incorporate animations and audio as well as other features that cause them to resemble podcasts, cartoons, interactive games, music videos, virtual reality, and augmented reality experiences. Print and digital comics both remain popular and are equally enjoyed across many social groups. In some instances, differences between individual and group preferences lead some people to consume specific genres in print and other genres in digital formats. Although print comics remain popular, their economic value has fallen. A surplus of physical comics exists, and most authors now use print-on-demand services. The only worthwhile print comics investments are classics and new titles with limited print runs.

The current U.S. Education Secretary often speaks of the importance of John Dewey's (1909) scholarship on democracy in education and the need to inspire students with moving ideas. Throughout his career he often used critical media literacy and CRT as theoretical frameworks in his research. Despite this, he believes that the Department of Education should continue its decades-long tradition of largely allowing school districts to independently determine their own curricula. As was the case in previous decades, different versions of history are taught throughout the country, and debates over pedagogy and curricula continue. In response to the acceptance of CRT by some educational institutions, many conservative schools espouse the Great American Curriculum (GAC). The official GAC website states that it was established "to ensure that students recognize the triumphs and meritorious accomplishments of America's greatest citizens so that their legacies will continue to inspire future generations of capitalists."

Schools no longer promote notions that Columbus discovered America, but conservative K-12 settings offer hagiographic portrayals of his life and now refer to him as one of the "founding 'great' grandfathers of the greatest country in history." Teachers in these schools continue to graduate from Teachers Education programs that promote individualism, GAC, and meritocracy. Research at this time suggests that liberal-minded educators are often not hired, are dismissed, or choose to resign from their positions in these settings. Elite conservative universities are handsomely supported by financial contributions from the wealthiest U.S. citizens. Many public and private K-12 schools in wealthy conservative communities quietly receive funding from anonymous donors in the U.S. and abroad. These schools also enjoy the latest in technologies and resources.

Liberal public and private schools have become increasingly progressive along with the U.S. population. They are largely taught by teachers who have been introduced to critical pedagogies in their Teachers Education programs. Their history lessons are infused with attempts to incorporate the perspectives of multiple groups (e.g., the Tainos, Caribs, and Lucayans who lived in the Caribbean before Columbus arrived, as well as the men who traveled with Columbus). A minority of conservative educators also graduate from these programs and teach at these schools. Inequities between liberal schools persist. Elite universities and K-12 schools with liberal teachers and student populations walk a tightrope between promoting theories concerning the need for equality, enjoying endowments that ensure they have access to cutting edge technologies, and enrolling a low percentage of students from lower socioeconomic communities and underrepresented social groups. Meanwhile, students and teachers at liberal K-12 schools in lower socioeconomic communities continue to bring attention to the unfair distribution of technologies and social resources across school districts. They communicate their demands through targeted social media campaigns inspired by their arts-based inquiry assignments and at voting booths for local, state, and federal elections. However, they also actively reject the "low-tech schools" labeling regularly used by outsiders to describe them. Instead, they insist that they be referred to as "highly critical schools." This movement includes many scholars,

researchers, and educators of students from lower-socioeconomic communities who wish to distinguish themselves from others who promote the use of critical pedagogies in schools and universities but do not visibly practice it.

Citizens recognize the term “media literacy.” Schools throughout the country continue to teach it in varying ways (Degand, 2019). This long-established skillset is formally recognized by educators and scholars as the ability to “decode, evaluate, analyze, and produce both print and electronic media” (Aufderheide, 1993, p. 1). Laypersons unofficially recognize media literacy as the ability to use different mediums. Individuals consume textual media on digital devices but books are promoted as the primary signifier of erudition, especially among wealthy families of all political parties. The digital educational media produced for many elite schools mimic physical books despite empirical evidence during that period that continually recommends otherwise. Conversely, there are also many public and private schools that practice critical media literacy—a form of media literacy that utilizes critical pedagogies and “deepens the potential of education to critically analyze relationships between media and audiences, information and power” (Kellner & Share, 2007, p. 59). These schools promote the valuing of all mediums, cultures, and linguistic practices. This is especially the case in the “highly critical schools” network.

Black students are positively influenced by the public accomplishments of many Black Americans on the national stage and in the increasingly progressive educational curricula implemented in U.S. schools. After the Black Lives Matter era (2013-2027), the number of Black politicians, physicians, inventors, engineers, corporate executives, media producers, business owners, and professional sports team owners increased throughout the country. The percentage of Black individuals in these positions remains disproportionately low, but their growing presence in Black communities is noticeable. As Black youth see and interact with more examples of these individuals at family gatherings, neighborhood events, and school functions, they increasingly envision themselves in professional fields that had been less accessible to previous generations.

Despite changes in technology, fashion, and curricula, K-12 schools retain many of their twentieth century characteristics and continue to be racially segregated. Students’ experiences are largely influenced by the cultural context in which their instruction is provided. Black students in predominantly White liberal educational settings encounter teachers who espouse CRT, and this positively influences their experiences. Similarly, Black students in predominantly White conservative K-12 schools encounter teachers who teach content from the GAC, and they rate their experiences as very positive. In both settings, the experiences and accomplishments of Black Americans and other people of color are overshadowed by the experiences of White Americans. However, these Black students are members of families that share the cultural philosophies and political ideologies of their respective schools.

Black students in diverse or predominantly Black schools are simultaneously influenced by the political leanings of their families and their communities’ desires to inculcate Black pride in them. Conservative Black schools incorporate content that primarily highlights the achievements of conservative Black figures, and liberal Black schools ensure that liberal Black figures are recognized. LGBTQIA2S+ communities and people with disabilities continue to be marginalized. One week out of each school year, the school curricula focus on each of these two communities. Detailed and focused attention to their experiences in K-12 curricula is only found in specialized schools that cater to individuals from these communities.

A small percentage of teachers use comics in K-12 and postsecondary classrooms. This is positively influenced by its acceptance as a valid art form during this time. Comics are not officially considered an academic medium, but they are used by educators who value multimodal pedagogies. Comics assignments vary greatly. Some educators struggle with their assessments of these assignments because they do not receive this training in most Teachers Education programs and undergraduate education courses.

Notable examples of Black educational settings that incorporate comics into student instruction are highlighted in research published during this period. These studies investigate the experiences of Black students across formal, nonformal, and informal educational settings. The successes of these examples are credited to the resources produced from the efforts of community organizers, artists, and authors associated with the Black Speculative Arts Movement (BSAM). Findings from a number of these studies were highlighted at the 25th annual Schomburg Center’s Black Comic Book Festival in 2037. This multiday event was originally held at one site but now takes place at multiple locations throughout Harlem. Noteworthy details from the studies include examples of student-produced comics at K-12 and postsecondary levels. The stories from this collection cover a wide range of topics such as critiques of cisgenderopatriarchal narratives, scenarios of life in 2250, politically conservative Black heroes, and a literature review of Black comic book creators. Another significant study presented at this convening reviewed

findings from a comparative analysis of numerous rubrics that are used to assess comics produced for arts-based inquiry or illustration assignments. An additional important presentation demonstrated how several comics from arts-based inquiry assignments had inspired students to conduct research into the important legacy of student activism and engagement in political movements (Altbach, 2017). Presently, two of the eighteen Black student comic book authors from this on-going longitudinal study are state elected officials.

This scenario assumes that the political pendulum continues oscillating between the major parties and resides in the progressive portion of its path by 2032. This future is inspired by past and present sociocultural and political movements, and assumes that social divisions and conflicts will persist. This scenario also presents a future during which a large segment of society embraces comics as an artform while also considering how new technologies might influence their evolution and the economy of the comics industry. I also reflect on how comics might thrive as an educational resource even if they are deemed unworthy by a majority of educational leaders. The next section offers a second alternative vision of our futures.

Scenario 2: Smart education

The U.S. electorate is disenchanted with politics in 2038. Voter turnout rates are at their lowest since 1924 (McDonald, n.d.); less than half of the electorate participates. Yet, active voters are happy with the status quo and seek to maintain it. A Republican president sits in the oval office and is the latest in a series of centrist Democratic and Republican presidents. There is a Republican Senate majority and a Democratic House majority. A large percentage of Black Americans gradually join the Republican party and agree with its increasingly moderate conservative policies. Meanwhile, Independent politicians make incremental progress as more Black Americans begin identifying as non-partisan.

Artificial intelligence algorithms have been participating in the creation of art experiences for several years (Gaskins, 2021). Now interactive art algorithms create new digital works in real time. Each viewing is unique due to the randomness introduced during personal interactions with the artwork. Some critics and scholars continue to debate whether the computer or the programmer is the artist. General consensus is that these works are a new classification of art. Artists of many backgrounds participate in this new artform. Nevertheless, White artists receive the most recognition. The predominantly White gatekeepers, critics, and judges for this artform explain that they elevate works that present near-flawless demonstrations of cultural arts traditions and technological innovation. They stress that the lower-ranked submissions lack this balance. Naysayers argue that this is a continuation of centuries-long examples of discrimination in the arts wherein White artists are elevated and a select number of non-White artists are accepted.

A few comics-related experiences are powered by interactive art algorithms that generate narratives and visual assets. Scholars and critics describe these products as an amalgamation of choose-your-own-adventure stories, games, and graphic narratives. They are live-streamed for consumers and recorded for subsequent viewings. Ownership of each unique narrative is fought in federal courts. Despite their growing popularity, they are not the most common form of comics because they are expensive to produce and maintain. Animated and static digital comics are ubiquitous on online platforms and are read on an assortment of communications devices. Physical comics are rarely printed. Many printed versions of older comics are priceless because they are rarely seen. Natural disasters, such as wildfires and flooding, have destroyed large collections of comics and other print media.

Most citizens are content with minimalist lifestyles because costs of living have greatly increased. Unpredictable weather and natural disasters require residents to be prepared for immediate evacuations during which electronics, libraries, furniture, vehicles, and other possessions are destroyed. Many reside in smaller homes. Their property (photos, books, music, etc.) is stored in digital formats on cloud networks and protected from loss when their physical devices malfunction. Cloud data backup systems are situated in numerous geographic locations throughout the world. This insures them against simultaneous failure during emergencies (Tsubaki et al, 2020). The Internet of Things (IoT) and smart devices enable technology companies to maintain disaster management systems and reduce loss of human life and property (França et al., 2020). Digital currencies and mobile payment apps are primarily used during purchases. Wealthy families live in designated “disaster-free zones” and are the only groups that can afford to live in larger residences. They decorate their homes with large bookcases, smart televisions and other physical items. Physical books are assets in many investment portfolios.

Hybrid schooling experiences are now commonplace. Education consists of asynchronous and synchronous

online interactions, and in-person meetings at school sites and other locations (as determined by schools' and communities' needs and resources). It is a collaborative effort between K-12 schools, colleges, community organizations, educational nonprofits, sports organizations, and religious institutions. The Department of Education (DoEd) facilitates these collaborations through grants and supports infrastructures that enable these partnerships to thrive.

The DoEd actively promotes multiliteracy in schools. Students from all communities enjoy their arts-based inquiry assignments because they tie seamlessly into community events, local efforts, and employment opportunities. Many students in middle- and high-income communities enjoy direct access to representatives in Fortune 500 companies through school partnerships. Their arts-based work introduces new perspectives to these companies and informs students' internships and cooperative programs. Students from all socioeconomic circumstances participate in entrepreneurial projects that address the issues they examine in their multimodal arts-based projects. These students contribute to the establishment and evolution of numerous small businesses. Their efforts positively influence local economies because their money stays in local educational and social networks.

The DoEd's National Center for Education Research actively funds studies that examine how students' experiences have been influenced by the 2027 Make Every Student Multiliterate Act (MESMA). The DoEd's MESMA webpage states:

The Make Every Student Multiliterate Act builds on decades of progress from educators, researchers, communities, parents, and students. Research shows that today's students are living in a multimodal society that requires them to be literate in numerous communications media. This act will ensure that future generations are better prepared to find success in college and in the U.S. workforce.

Initial findings from studies conducted at the five-year mark were mixed due to large differences between curricula and resources across the nation's schools. Today's studies include multiple longitudinal investigations in rural, suburban, and urban contexts. These studies also examine differences between how MESMA initiatives are implemented in schools with less technological resources than those with state-of-the-art technologies.

The successes of smart home devices that "connect the unconnected in all aspects of home, work, and civic life" (Rottinghaus, 2021, p. 48) inspire technology entrepreneurs to establish similar smart environments in hybrid educational settings. Elite schools are outfitted with expensive feature-rich options in the *Smart Employment & Education Network* (SEEN) ecosystem of apps and hardware from Amazon, Apple, Google, Microsoft, and numerous other newer technology companies. SEEN is marketed as an efficient, persistent, and valuable customized educational experience for each student. It promotes the use of multimodal pedagogies, arts-based educational experiences, and stores all student submissions indefinitely. It is simultaneously marketed to teachers as a streamlined teaching assistant. These products track students' academic progress, physical locations, school attendance (in-person and virtual), and academic multimedia portfolios. In the past, some individuals were happily surprised to discover that their report cards and past assignments had been saved by their parents. Today's equivalent examples are students who have been in the SEEN system their whole lives and can review all their academic portfolio and attendance records.

SEEN systems in wealthy schools are expertly maintained and regularly upgraded. The rising costs of tuition in these PK-20 institutions cover the costs. Their locations in "disaster-free zones" provide the stability needed to ensure that their local SEEN systems persist. Conversely, SEEN systems for students in middle-income communities are configured with affordable apps and hardware, and fewer features. The experiences of these students are visibly different from that of students in wealthier communities. Students in lower socioeconomic networks have limited access to SEEN features. Their basic setups quickly become obsolete and are ignored by faculty and students because their schools cannot afford to update their systems regularly. In some instances, several startup companies attempted to create more affordable educational smart solutions but they were unable to compete with SEEN. Many schools did not renew their contracts and the companies shuttered. Those schools reverted to using locally maintained systems that are sustained by teachers and their communities. The schools are outfitted with refurbished computer hardware. Despite being inactive in these contexts, SEEN branding is visible everywhere because federal funding provided the initial payments that were needed to install their hardware in all schools.

All school curricula promote the cultures of their respective communities (e.g., conservative schools promote conservative views, liberal schools endorse liberal beliefs, religious schools teach their religions). Interestingly, a

few conservative institutions in lower income areas pride themselves on preserving library bookshelves that are stacked with a large number of physical books locked behind glass cases. Mint copies of classic texts from Barry Goldwater, Russell Kirk, William Shakespeare, and other school board-approved authors comprise these collections. Liberal school settings also house libraries, but these rooms rarely contain books. Instead, they contain cubicle spaces designated for quiet studying. Students may borrow school computers, or connect their personal devices to school Wi-Fi and access the multimodal content in each digital library collection.

Pre-service and in-service teachers are officially trained in how to use comics in their classrooms. Student-produced comics are stored in each student's multimodal academic portfolio. Educators learn to discern between different SEEN comics templates because the process for creating comics is standardized. This is celebrated by instructors who use SEEN as an automated grader. Arts-based inquiry comics assignments do not evaluate students' artistry, yet instructors are aware that the designs of expensive templates are noticeably superior to the designs of default templates. SEEN's comics modules also enable manual grading. This option is preferred by art instructors because several student artists are producing comics with interactive art algorithms, and their submissions require more attention during grading. Non-arts instructors prefer manual grading when their assignments call for deviations from SEEN's instructions. In contrast, student-produced comics in lower-income communities often do not use SEEN templates. There are greater variations in the quality of the visuals and narratives seen in these submissions.

Years ago, Rottinghaus (2021) detailed how smart home devices and IoT products are "built for an always-connected, perpetually-working, corporate employee" (p. 50) and warned that "the vision proffered by today's tech industry lacks any meaningful engagement with imaginative futures that might be liberating or otherwise transformative—especially when it comes to labor" (p. 54). These warnings are relevant to SEEN in 2038. SEEN attendance records and performance evaluations factor into which students will be accepted into top universities and subsequently who will be hired by top organizations in each professional field. These same organizations use Professional versions of SEEN products to conduct workplace performance evaluations and determine promotions.

SEEN's location tracking features are a boon during emergencies (e.g., natural disasters, school shootings). Yet, Black students in predominantly White educational settings complain about racial profiling. Several investigations determined that Black students' locations are tracked at a disproportionately greater frequency than that of White students in SEEN. Educators explain that the program identifies White facial features more accurately than Black facial features. Inconsistencies regularly arise when clients compare location data from their visual capture reports and GPS tracking reports. The system flags these inconsistencies for school administrators to review and confirm. In an exclusive news report, SEEN's executives explain that the facial recognition errors are due to new laws that require permission before an individual can be included in their database. SEEN continues to have difficulties recruiting Black participants for public inclusion in their facial recognition databases after it was revealed that many Black participants had been included without consent and payment. Non-Black participants were recruited and compensated, and a large percentage of the Black faces in the system are mugshots acquired through contracts with public and private prison organizations.

This scenario considers how Americans might react to a political system that continuously preserves the status quo. It also imagines how artificial intelligence, IoT, and other technologies might influence art experiences, educational institutions, and the evolution of comics and other media. Moreover, dire consequences from today's climate crisis are acknowledged alongside the persistence of inequities across society.

Conclusion

A significant portion of the proposed futures speculate on uncertainties introduced by variables and trends that can influence Black education and comics. There is no panacea for fallacies that may encourage future inequities for Black students and other minoritized citizens. Yet, there are present-day efforts that offer hope. A precursor to the "highly critical schools" movement imagined in the first scenario could be the BSAM network and their interests in STEAM (Science Technology Engineering Arts & Math) and culturally situated learning (Anderson, 2016). Moreover, the continued marginalization and omission of LGBTQIA2S+ communities is highlighted by futures scholars (Brooks et al., 2021). Queer The Future's (2021) call-to-action is a collaborative effort that "imagine[s] near-term and long-range futures that center thriving queer lives" (para. 2).

In conclusion, I offer two comics that encourage us to imagine a future during which students, scholars, artists,

and activists continue discussing Black education and comics. Figure 3 below presents the first comic, illustrating an in-person and virtual option for participating in the 25th convening of the Schomburg Black Comic Book Festival. The second comic, in Figure 4 below, imagines a panel at the 35th convening of the East Coast Black Age of Comics Convention during which the presenter reflects on how older media influences the evolved versions of the comics experienced in 2037.

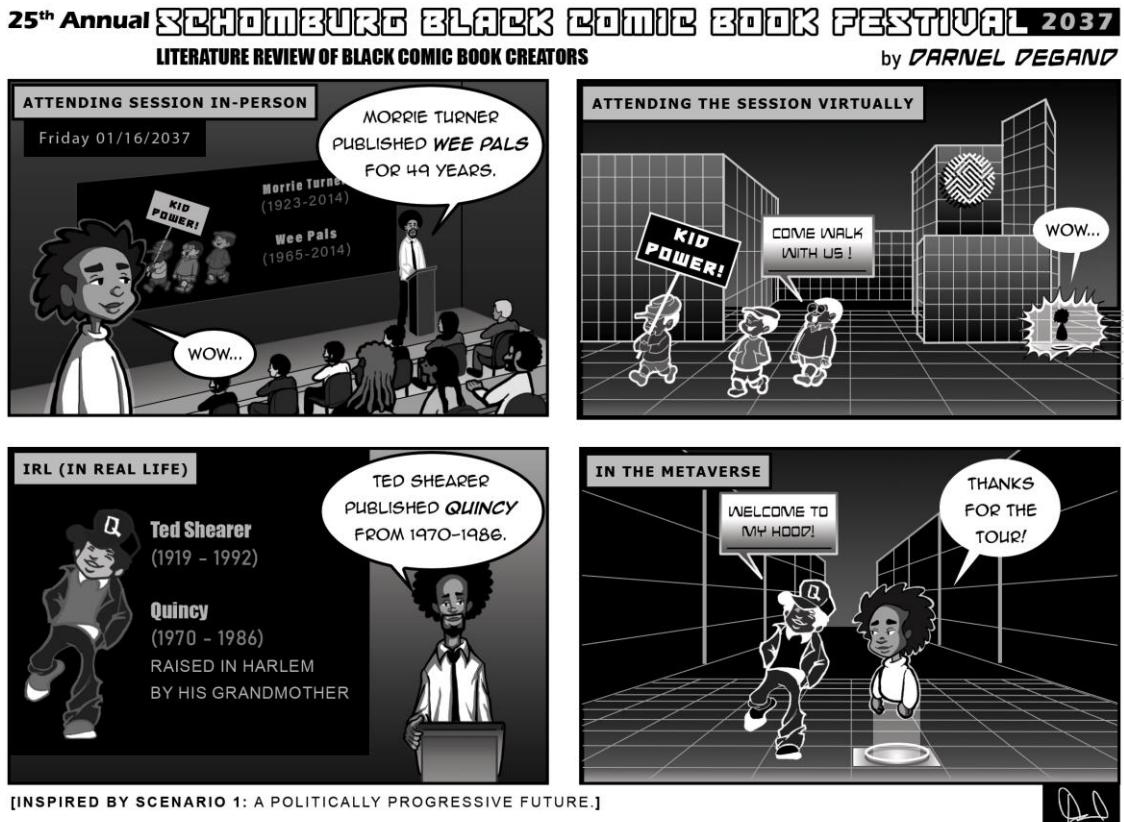


Fig. 3: SCHOMCOM in 2037

**Fig. 4:** ECBACC in 2037**References**

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