

**Alondra Nelson**

We will make our own future Text.  
—Ishmael Reed, *Mumbo Jumbo*

and on to post now  
post new  
—Amiri Baraka, “Time Factor a Perfect Non-Gap”

In popular mythology, the early years of the late-1990s digital boom were characterized by the rags-to-riches stories of dot-com millionaires and the promise of a placeless, raceless, bodiless near future enabled by technological progress. As more pragmatic assessments of the industry surfaced, so too did talk of the myriad inequities that were exacerbated by the information economy—most notably, the digital divide, a phrase that has been used to describe gaps in technological access that fall along lines of race, gender, region, and ability but has mostly become a code word for the tech inequities that exist between blacks and whites. Forecasts of a utopian (to some) race-free future and pronouncements of the dystopian digital divide are the predominant discourses of blackness and technology in the public sphere. What matters is less a choice between these two narratives, which fall into conventional libertarian and conservative frameworks, and more what they have in common: namely, the assumption that race is a liability in the twenty-first century—is either negligible or evidence of negligence. In these politics of the future, supposedly novel paradigms for understanding technology smack of old racial ideologies. In each scenario, racial identity, and blackness in particular, is the anti-avatar of digital life. Blackness gets constructed as always oppositional to technologically driven chronicles of progress.

That race (and gender) distinctions would be eliminated with technology was perhaps the founding fiction of the digital age. The raceless future paradigm, an adjunct of Marshall McLuhan’s “global village” metaphor, was widely supported by (and made strange bedfellows of) pop visionaries, scholars, and corporations from Timothy Leary to Allucquère Rosanne Stone to MCI. Spurred by “revolutions” in technoscience, social and cultural theorists looked increasingly to information technology, especially the Internet and the World Wide Web, for new paradigms. We

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might call this cadre of analysts and boosters of technoculture, who stressed the unequivocal novelty of identity in the digital age, neocritics. Seemingly working in tandem with corporate advertisers, neocritics argued that the information age ushered in a new era of subjectivity and insisted that in the future the body wouldn't bother us any longer. There was a peculiar capitalist logic to these claims, as if writers had taken up the marketing argot of "new and improved."

There was also much that was familiar in this rhetoric. As rapturous proclamations of the Internet's ability to connect everyone, everywhere echoed the predictions that greeted the age of the telephone, so did neocriticism's imperative to embrace the new and transform the body fall neatly in line with older narratives of technology and forgetting—most notably, the futurism movement of the turn of the twentieth century. In 1909 Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, an Italian artist, published "The Foundation and Manifesto of Futurism," in which he called for a new aesthetic that could properly represent the sensation of living in a rapidly modernizing world. Marinetti glorified the creative destruction of war, exalted the beauty of "eternal, omnipresent speed," and promised to sing of the revolutionary potential of factories, shipyards, locomotives, and airplanes. He called for the end of the old, proclaiming, "But we want no part of it, the past, we the young and strong *Futurists!*"<sup>1</sup> In constructing his vision of the future, Marinetti implicitly evoked a subjectivity that was decidedly male, young, and carved out in relation to the past and the "feminine."

While neocriticism's take on identity tended more toward the glorification of the self's dissolving than its hardening, it was propelled by a similar impetus to understand the technological transformations that characterized the beginning of a new era. Technoevangelist Timothy Leary proclaimed that advances in technology augured the end of burdensome social identities. Out with those old categories from the social movements of the 1960s, in with the new. Leary predicted that "in the future, the methods of information technology, molecular engineering, biotechnology, nanotechnology (atom stacking), and quantum-digital programming could make the human form a matter totally determined by individual whim, style, and seasonal choice."<sup>2</sup> Leary's prediction was social science fiction, a rendering of the not-now, a possible future without a certain end but loaded with assumptions. He assumed that "ever-loosening physical constraints" would free us from our cumbersome bodies and imagined that in the future identity would be driven by the consumer imperatives of whim and choice. Technology offered a future of wholly new human beings—unfettered not only from the physical body but from past human experience as well. Leary presupposed that such freedom would be widely

available and universally sought after. Yet as Andrew Ross cautioned, “radical humanism” of the sort Leary advocated would, by choice or circumstance, “only free a minority of humans.”<sup>3</sup> Bodies carry different social weights that unevenly mediate access to the freely constructed identity that Leary advocated. To be sure, his theory is an extreme example of the neocriticism that characterizes much writing about the social impact of computer technology. And yet the spirit of Leary’s discourse of disembodiment, which fit an unrelentingly progressive and libertarian vision of the future, became an important inspiration for theories of identity in the digital age.

For others, technological change was the catalyst for a transformation of conceptions of the self.<sup>4</sup> In the influential work *The War of Desire and Technology at the Close of the Mechanical Age*, Allucquère Rosanne Stone marshaled theory, observation, and fictionalized anecdote to describe the nature of contemporary identity. According to Stone, in the “virtual age” our awareness of the fragmented self is heightened by computer-mediated communication.<sup>5</sup> In crafting her argument, Stone was influenced by two theories of identity and multiplicity. One held that the decentered self is the reaction of the body/subject/citizen to absolute state power; by this logic, fragmented identity is an assertion of agency under a system of complete subjugation. Stone’s argument was also informed by psychological literature on multiple personality disorders (MPDs), in which “split personalities” are explained as responses to violence, trauma, and other “less overt methods of subjection.” In this model, manifold selves are understood as a tactic for negotiating forms of oppression.

Despite the grave implications of these hypotheses, Stone aspired to recoup such multiplicity as a practice of pleasure and desire. But in her rush to celebrate the possibilities opened up by computer technology, Stone overlooked the fact that, as Kalí Tal has suggested, over a century’s worth of “sophisticated tools for the analysis of cyberculture” already existed in African American thought.<sup>6</sup> These extant theories, Tal insists, provide political and theoretical precedents for articulating and understanding “multiple identities, fragmented personae and liminality”—most notably W. E. B. DuBois’s concept of double consciousness. They also “contradict the notion that the absence of the (illusion of) unitary self is something new”: despite the easy proliferation of selves in the digital age, the flux of identity that Stone extolled has long been the experience of African diasporic people.

DuBois’s double consciousness was not simply an uncritical assertion of multiple personalities but rather a dogged analysis of both the origins and stakes of this multiplicity. What falls by the wayside in Stone’s analysis—and neocriticism more generally—is an appraisal of identity that

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does not simply look to what is seemingly new about the self in the “virtual age” but looks backward *and* forward in seeking to provide insights about identity, one that asks what was *and* what if. While Stone gives poignant witness to the ontology of multiplicity, she is less able to show how the dialectic between defining oneself in light of ties to one’s history and experience and being defined from without (be it in virtual or physical space, by stereotypes or the state) determines the shape of computer-mediated aggregate identities as much or more than the leisurely flux of personality.

Like Leary’s predictions, Stone’s argument begged the question of who would be able to so easily cast aside identity and, moreover, what was at stake in doing so. While Stone is careful to maintain that there is indeed a link between virtual and physical selves, she nevertheless deploys an identity politics that privileges personality performance. Yet understanding the changing terrain of identity in the virtual age requires not only attention to the technical construction of selves over a distributed network but a sense of how multiplicity works to both deflect and buttress structures of power and an understanding of how selves are differently situated both within and outside of this network.

In contrast, the shifting ecology of racialization in the virtual age has been most thoroughly explored in the scholarship of Lisa Nakamura. Nakamura’s analyses of sci-fi films, technology advertisements, and identity tourism in MUDs and MOOs have offered counterpoints to the often hidden racial ideologies of the information era.<sup>7</sup> In a study of late-1990s ads for computer companies, Nakamura explored how the promise of a liberated world of tomorrow, free of the cumbersome weight of racial identity, is proliferated by corporations in television commercials and print advertising—most memorably in a 1997 commercial for MCI entitled “Anthem,” which pronounced that there was no age, gender, or race on the Internet. Nakamura examined how several corporations deployed images of people of color, often in “exotic” locales, to sell their wares; yet these representations were merely colorful backdrops to commercial disavowals of racial difference. As Nakamura explained: “The iconography of these advertising images demonstrates that the corporate image factory *needs* images of the Other in order to depict its product: a technological utopia of difference. It is not however, a utopia *for* the Other or one that includes it in any meaningful or progressive way. Rather, it proposes an ideal world of virtual social and cultural reality based on specific methods of ‘Othering.’”<sup>8</sup>

One such method of “othering” was the ads’ use of imagery of exotic people and places, emancipated from past histories and contemporary sociopolitical context. As Nakamura observed, “ethnic difference in the

world of Internet advertising is visually ‘cleansed’ of its divisive, problematic, tragic connotations. The ads function as corrective texts for readers deluged with images of racial conflicts and bloodshed both at home and abroad. These advertisements put the world right.” The experiences of the people depicted were rendered negligible or, in Nakamura’s words, “made ‘not to count,’ through technology.”<sup>9</sup>

Public discourse about race and technology, led by advertisers (and aided and abetted by cybertheorists), was preoccupied with the imagined new social arrangements that might be made possible by technological advance. Advertisers relied on a shared message about race and ethnicity—the disappearance of the DuBoisian “color line”—to promote their products. Nakamura’s study elucidated how centrally race figures in contemporary narratives of technology, even in its (putative) absence. Representations of race and ethnicity created a cognitive dissonance in tech advertising; dissimilitude was slyly neutralized but never fully erased, for this alterity was necessary to the ideology of the technology being sold.

If the ads scrutinized by Nakamura can be said to reflect the high-tech, raceless promised land (and its internal inconsistencies), a recent South African ad for Land Rover illuminates the stakes of the other predominant discourse of race and technology, the digital divide. The ad, which ran in popular magazines in South Africa, depicts a Himba woman from Namibia in traditional attire. Much like an image from *National Geographic* (Nakamura makes a similar observation regarding the advertisements she discussed), the woman is shown bare-breasted. She stands alone in the desert, her only companion the latest model of the Land Rover Freelander, speedily departing. The force of the vehicle’s back draft as it accelerates pulls her breasts toward it. Her “feminine primitiveness” and the slick silver veneer of the sport-utility vehicle are in sharp contrast; the Freelander rapidly heads toward the future, leaving her in the past. In this single image, we are presented with a visual metaphor for the ostensible oppositionality of race (primitive past) and technology (modern future) that is the most cutting side of the double-edged concept of the digital divide.<sup>10</sup>

If a sport-utility vehicle leaves people of African descent literally blowing in the wind, then the information age surely comes on like a tornado. Though meant to draw attention to true disparities, the well-meant concept of the digital divide is Janus-faced: there are indeed critical gaps in technological access and computer literacy that are comprehensible through the prisms of race, gender, socioeconomics, region, and age. Nonetheless, this paradigm is frequently reduced to race alone and thus falls all too easily in stride with preconceived ideas of black technical handicaps and “Western” technological superiority. Like the Himba woman

left eating the dust of technology, the underlying assumption of much digital divide rhetoric is that people of color, and African Americans in particular, cannot keep pace with our high-tech society.

The digital divide paradigm obscures the fact that uneven access to technology is a symptom of economic inequalities that predate the Arpanet (the prototype of the Internet) and the World Wide Web.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, this “myth of black disingenuity with technology,” to borrow a phrase from historian of science and medicine Evelyn Hammonds, does not account for the centrality of black people’s labor in modernization and industrialization as well as the historical truths of black participation in technological development.<sup>12</sup> Examples of such participation include the contributions of inventor Garret Morgan, who invented the traffic light in 1923; the vernacular chemistry of Madame C. J. Walker, who created a multi-million-dollar black beauty business; the creation of the Lingo computer language by programmer John Henry Thompson; and pioneering music production techniques.<sup>13</sup>

The racialized digital divide narrative that circulates in the public sphere and the bodiless, color-blind mythotopias of cybertheory and commercial advertising have become the unacknowledged frames of reference for understanding race in the digital age. In these frameworks, the technologically enabled future is by its very nature unmoored from the past and from people of color. Neocritical narratives suggest that it is primitiveness or outmodedness, the obsolescence of something or someone else, that confirms the novel status of the virtual self, the cutting-edge product, or the high-tech society.

## Post New

As Kalí Tal maintains, African diasporic history contains a wealth of theoretical paradigms that turn the reified binary between blackness and technology on its head, readily lending themselves to the task of constructing adequate frames of reference for contemporary theories of technoculture. From the early model of fractured consciousness offered by W. E. B. DuBois to the fractal patterns found in West African architecture, examples of black cultural prefigurations of our contemporary moment abound.<sup>14</sup>

For the purposes of this essay, Ishmael Reed’s acclaimed 1972 novel *Mumbo Jumbo* offers particularly fertile ground. The novel, which took the form of a detective story, was less a whodunit than an epistemological mystery. *Mumbo Jumbo* details one episode of an ongoing contest between the JGC’s—the carriers of “jes grew,” the meme of African diasporic culture—and the Atonists, supporters of the “Western civilization” mythol-

ogy of world history. The novel's plot centers around competing efforts to encourage and restrain the itinerant cultural virus, "jes grew."

Reed has used the word *necromancy* to describe his project as a writer, defining it as "us[ing] the past to explain the present and to prophesize about the future."<sup>15</sup> Reed's understanding of a usable past runs counter to the futurism of the early twentieth century. Russian poet Kasimir Malevich described futurism as a way to pull oneself out of "the catacombs into the speed of our time. I affirm that whoever has not trod the path of Futurism as the exponent of modern life, is condemned to crawl for ever among the ancient graves and feed on the crusts of the past."<sup>16</sup> For Reed, on the other hand, the catacombs are not an archaic, occult place to be left behind for the clean light of modern science and technology but rather the gateway to a more complete understanding of the future. "Necromancers used to lie in the guts of the dead or in the tombs to receive visions of the future. That is prophecy. The black writer lies in the guts of old America, making readings about the future," he explained.<sup>17</sup> With this definition of necromancy, Reed presented a temporal orientation that seem to contradict discourses of the future predicated on either ignoring the past or rendering it as staid and stagnant. Unlike neocritics, Reed conjured "readings" of a living past, retained in the present and carried into the future.

The "jes grew" of *Mumbo Jumbo* is perhaps the best example of this. Reed borrows this phrase from civil rights activist and cultural theorist James Weldon Johnson, who used it to describe the proliferation of ragtime songs, commenting that they "jes grew" (or just grew). In the novel, "jes grew" refers to African diasporic cultures that live and evolve in the forms of gesture, music, dance, visual culture, epistemology, and language, crossing geography and generations by moving from carrier to carrier and thus threatening the knowledge monopoly of the "West": "'Jes Grew' traversed the land in search of its Text: the lost liturgy seeking its litany. Its words, chants held in bondage by the mysterious Order. . . . Jes Grew needed its words to tell its carriers what it was up to. Jes Grew was an influence which sought its text, and whenever it thought it knew the location of its words and Labanotations it headed in that direction."<sup>18</sup> The missing text, which originated in ancient Africa, represents the opportunity to encode African diasporic vernacular culture and create a tangible repository of black experience.

Throughout the novel, PaPa LaBas—the novel's protagonist, spiritual detective, and proprietor of the Mumbo Jumbo Cathedral, a Hoodoo holistic health-gathering place—tracks "jes grew" as it seeks its text. Toward the novel's end, having discovered that the text has been destroyed, PaPa LaBas optimistically predicts, "We will make our own future Text. A future generation of young artists will accomplish this." At first take, this



statement seems to fall in line with the utopian aspirations of contemporary neocriticism. Yet LaBas is no unsophisticated booster of the new: this forecast is a vision of the future that is purposely inflected with tradition. Rather than despair when he finds out that the Text has been destroyed, LaBas believes that the next generation will be successful in creating a text that can codify black culture: past, present, and future. Rather than a “Western” image of the future that is increasingly detached from the past or, equally problematic, a future-primitive perspective that fantasizes an uncomplicated return to ancient culture, LaBas foresees the distillation of African diasporic experience, rooted in the past but not weighed down by it, contiguous yet continually transformed.

The “anachronism” that is an element of much of Reed’s work is used to express a unique perspective on time and tradition. This effect is achieved in his writing through what he terms “synchronizing”: “putting disparate elements into the same time, making them run in the same time, together.”<sup>19</sup> Such an approach is characteristic of how technology works in *Mumbo Jumbo*. Reed’s synchronous model defies the progressive linearity of much recent technocultural criticism. As Sämi Ludwig has observed, technologies exist independently of time in the novel; though it is set in the 1920s, the story contains references to technologies that will not be readily available until years later.<sup>20</sup> For example, Ludwig notes that a leader of the Wall Flower Order, the military arm of the Atonists, made use of video and television to monitor the progress of “jes grew” from his headquarters. In this case, technologies from the setting’s future and the author’s present inhabit a story situated in the past.

Reed’s synchronicity extends to the placement of obsolete technologies in the present. Though not hardware as such, a communication technique called “knockings” is used by PaPa LaBas to receive information from beyond. Ludwig likens the “knockings” to radio waves; they could also be sensory perceptions, premonitions, or communiqués from the past that live through those who, like LaBas, continue to make use of them.<sup>21</sup> (Importantly, Reed does not pit his protagonists against other forms of technology. LaBas also makes use of hardware like his Cathedral radio, and a multicultural gang in the novel, the Mu’tafikah, which repatriates artworks to their countries of origin, employs dictaphones in its campaign.)<sup>22</sup> Reed might be said to use synchronicity to reprioritize technologies. Like his critique of the dominant mythos of “Western civ,” his anachronistic use of technology in *Mumbo Jumbo* begs the question of what tools are valued by whom, and to what ends. With his innovative novel as an exemplar, Ishmael Reed has supplied a paradigm for an African diasporic technoculture.



The contributions to this issue are perhaps those “future texts” hoped for by Papa LaBas in Reed’s *Mumbo Jumbo*. The text and images gathered here reflect African diasporic experience and at the same time attend to the transformations that are the by-product of new media and information technology. They excavate and create original narratives of identity, technology, and the future and offer critiques of the promises of prevailing theories of technoculture. In addition, these contributions, gathered under the term *Afrofuturism*, offer takes on digital culture that do not fall into the trap of the neocritics or the futurists of one hundred years past. These works represent new directions in the study of African diaspora culture that are grounded in the histories of black communities, rather than seeking to sever all connections to them.

Many of the essays in this collection grew out of the relationships formed in an on-line community called Afrofuturism that I founded in the fall of 1998, and many of them expand, deploy, and take up the themes first discussed there. Afrofuturism can be broadly defined as “African American voices” with “other stories to tell about culture, technology and things to come.”<sup>23</sup> The term was chosen as the best umbrella for the concerns of “the list”—as it has come to be known by its members—“sci-fi imagery, futurist themes, and technological innovation in the African diaspora.”<sup>24</sup> The AfroFuturism listserv began as a project of the arts collective apogee with the goal of initiating dialogue that would culminate in a symposium called AfroFuturism|Forum.<sup>25</sup> Besides the community of thinkers, artists, and writers that has formed and been sustained through the listserv, perhaps its most meaningful function has been as an incubator of ideas.

The AfroFuturism list emerged at a time when it was difficult to find discussions of technology and African diasporic communities that went beyond the notion of the digital divide. From the beginning, it was clear that there was much theoretical territory to be explored. Early discussions included the concept of digital double consciousness; African diasporic cultural retentions in modern technoculture; digital activism and issues of access; dreams of designing technology based on African mathematical principles; the futuristic visions of black film, video, and music; the implications of the then-burgeoning MP3 revolution; and the relationship between feminism and Afrofuturism.

The contributors to this volume approach their themes from several angles: as unique analytical frameworks for interpreting black cultural production, as imagery of the near-future, as poetry. Essays by Alexander G. Weheliye and Ron Eglash consider identities of the digital age. With

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“‘Feenin’: Posthuman Voices in Contemporary Black Popular Music,” Weheliye reimagines one of the most vaunted contemporary social categories, that of the posthuman. Resisting a single totalizing elaboration of posthumanity that is remarkably yet unsurprisingly similar to the Western liberal subject, Weheliye turns away from preoccupations with the ocular (in the form of the iconography of the computer screen and the spectacle of visually apparent prosthetic posthumanity) in favor of the aurality and orality of R&B music. Weheliye recoups contemporary R&B as a witness to African diasporic life that articulates human longings and at the same time reveals how these longings are mediated by technologies. The vocoder is an example of this particular conjunction of “man” and machine: “a speech-synthesizing device that renders the human voice robotic,” producing an “audibly machinic black voice” that amplifies questions of race and technology. Weheliye offers a theory of digital age subjectivity centered around the encoding of black diasporic forms in terms of the new technologies that contribute to the daily realities of black life.

Ron Eglash reconfigures another hardwired persona of the digital age, that of the nerd or geek. Eglash argues that during a time when hackers with business made inroads in the halls of power, access to geek identity may perhaps smooth the path to influence and capital. In his essay “Race, Sex, and Nerds: From Black Geeks to Asian American Hipsters,” Eglash traces the racial, gendered, and sexual identities that have adhered to the figure of the nerd. The typically white male nerd, Eglash argues, eked out a representational space between “primitivism,” which cast people of African descent as oversexed and “closer to nature” than culture, and “orientalism,” which stereotyped people of Asian descent as “undersexualized,” overly abstract thinkers. Given that geek identity is carved out in opposition to other racial and gender myths, Eglash considers whether the appropriation of nerd identity can be a politically efficacious means of gaining technocultural capital.

While the benefits of black nerd identity may be debatable, African diasporic technophilia has a long history, according to Anna Everett. In her essay “The Revolution Will Be Digitized,” Everett argues that the African diaspora that resulted from chattel slavery encouraged, long before the term became chic, “self-sustaining virtual communities through paralinguistic and transnational communicative systems” that sustained a “diasporic consciousness.” She claims that the networked consciousness of the African diaspora of necessity prefigured the network consciousness often hailed as one of the benefits of the Internet. She maintains that this community consciousness persists “in cyberspace and the digital age.” According to Everett, even as the rhetoric of the digital divide prevailed,

1995 was a “watershed moment” for black connectivity, evidence of a “black technolust” that belied the prevailing narratives about race and technology in the public sphere. Everett believes that African diasporic communities in cyberspace offer the opportunity for fostering the black public sphere and for strengthening the links of the African diaspora using information technology as a tool of activism and social cohesion.

For Kali Tal in “That Just Kills Me,” the “information revolution” provides inspiration to reconsider existing texts as counternarratives to the futurism of neocriticism. Tal reflects on black militant near-future fiction of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Among the generic characteristics of what she identifies as a distinct subgenre of cautionary tales are a utopian vision that is actualized through violence and the decimation of the white population, secret societies, and alternative uses of technology. In the works she discusses, the near future is a utopia in which blacks free themselves from the constraints of racism; the racist past and present are dystopic. This work begs the question of how social utopias might be variously imagined and how the past and present shape what we imagine as a positive future. Tal asserts that the writings she discusses by Sutton Griggs, George Schuyler, John A. Williams, and Chester Himes reveal a little-known history of African American futurism that both provides another lens for interpreting black literature and sets compelling precedents for the more widely known black science fiction that has emerged in the past forty years.

Novelist Nalo Hopkinson is an heir apparent to this tradition of literary speculation. She presents her own visions of the future in her critically acclaimed fiction, which is an exemplar of the living past that Ishmael Reed advocates. Hopkinson writes speculative fiction, mixing fantasy, horror, and science fiction with African mythology, spirituality, and culture. Noting that many of the metaphors of science and science fiction are derived from ancient Greek and Roman language origins, including the words *cyborg* and *telephone*, Hopkinson contemplates what words a “largely African diasporic culture might build, what stories its people might tell themselves about technology.”<sup>26</sup> In the interview “Making the Impossible Possible,” Hopkinson discusses how she writes speculative fiction that incorporates diverse African traditions. With her contributions, “Afro-Future—Dystopic Unity,” “Mother Earth,” and “Vertical,” poet Tracie Morris offers elegiac reflections on “Western” science and technology. With this verse, Morris, a well-known performance poet and published writer, forges new directions with poetic language. She is less than sanguine about technoscience—each poem conjures the affect of loss and deception—linking it not to the promise of bright new futures but to biological abominations, genocidal campaigns, and environmental catastrophe.

The imagery of Tana Hargest and Fatimah Tuggar relies on digital-age tools to create visual speculation. Tuggar employs digital photomontage to construct a collision of time, place, and culture in a manner reminiscent of Ishmael Reed's synchronicity. Her images of northern Nigerian women in their everyday lives, using technologies both new and arcane, convey complex, often conflicting messages. Working with scale and color contrast, Tuggar hopes that the viewer will be conscious of, in the words of one reviewer, "the constructed nature of all images of Africa," in particular the continent's usual representation as an outmoded region, the opposite of what is modern and high-tech.<sup>27</sup> At first glance, Tuggar's cut-and-paste images seem to depict Nigerian women as victims of modern technology and Western imperialism, yet they ultimately reveal women as agents of technoculture. Placing traditional and more recent technologies on the same plane, Tuggar wants the viewer to understand them as tools that may have more in common than we think.

Tana Hargest uses computer-aided design technology to draw insights into the dilemmas of black life after the civil rights movement. Taking niche marketing to its speculative extreme, Hargest's project is a corporation, of which she is the CEO, called Bitter Nigger Inc. (BNI) that creates lifestyle products for African Americans living within the gilded cage of the color-blind aspirations of the information age. As she details in the letter to shareholders, BNI is comprised of several divisions, with one devoted to pharmaceuticals. The clever products developed by the pharmaceutical wing of BNI parody drugs like Claritin and Celebrex, the ads for which promise their own version of chemically enhanced utopia. In a manner reminiscent of George Schuyler's satirical novel *Black No More*, each BNI product identifies a "social problem" and offers a product as remedy; yet all have side effects. It isn't such a far leap from pharmacogenomics, the promise of drugs tailored for specific populations made possible by the coding of the human genome,<sup>28</sup> to Hargest's Tominex, a pill that helps the "buppie" consumer to "get along to go along." (The catch being that the pill is so big that in attempting to swallow the product/concept the consumer will choke.) Another product, "the Enforcer," is a behavior-correcting microchip implanted in whites that works to curb racism. The Big Brother aspect of this technology would seem to place it squarely in a dystopic world but, similar to the fiction that Kali Tal discusses, this surveillance chip promises a utopian world in which racism is curtailed.

The evolution of the Afrofuturism project from listserv to conference to this edited collection was achieved through the efforts of many people, most importantly the contributors to this volume, many of whom I first met in cyberspace. Thank you for sharing your creative labor. I owe a debt of gratitude to the members of the apogee collective; Simon Watson and Craig Hensala of Downtown Arts Projects; and the Peter Norton Family Foundation for their support. I am indebted to *all* of my fellow travelers of the AfroFuturism listserv for their insights and inspiration, especially Amneh Taye, W. Jelani Cobb, Lynn d. Johnson, Pam Mordecai, Andre Williams, David Goldberg, Kira Harris, Mark Rockeymoore, Camille Acey, Juba Kalamka, Bruce Sterling, Donna Golden, Ama Patterson, Lester K. Spence, and Franklin Sirmans. My sincere appreciation also goes to an incredible network of thinkers, writers, and doers for their support of the AfroFuturism project in its varied iterations: Thuy Linh N. Tu, Andrew Ross, Tricia Rose, Logan Hill, Carol Cooper, Makani Themba-Nixon, Jennie C. Jones, Jungwon Kim, Michelle-Lee White, Erika Muhammad, Robin D. G. Kelley, Jeff Chang, Manthia Diawara, Paul D. Miller, Lisa Duggan, Beth Coleman, Sheree Renee Thomas, and Alyssa Hepburn. My deepest debt of gratitude is due to Ben Williams—partner, ally, friend.

1. Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, “The Foundation and Manifesto of Futurism,” in *Art in Theory, 1900–1990: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, ed. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), 148.

2. Timothy Leary and Eric Gullichsen, “High-Tech Paganism,” in *Chaos and Cyber Culture* (Berkeley, Calif.: Ronin, 1994), 236.

3. Andrew Ross, “The New Smartness,” in *Culture on the Brink: Ideologies of Technology*, ed. Gretchen Bender and Timothy Druckery (Seattle: Bay, 1994), 335. For a further critique of this type of posthumanity, see Alexander G. Weheliye’s contribution to this issue, “‘Feenin’: Posthuman Voices in Contemporary Black Popular Music.”

4. See also Sherry Turkle, *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995) and Brenda Laurel, *Computers As Theatre* (New York: Addison-Wesley, 1995).

5. Allucquère Rosanne Stone, *The War of Desire and Technology at the Close of the Mechanical Age* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996), 36.

6. My critique of Stone’s argument draws on insights provided by Kali Tal, who makes a similar challenge to Sherry Turkle. See Kali Tal, “The Unbearable Whiteness of Being: African American Critical Theory and Cyberculture,” [www.kalital.com/Text/Writing/Whiteness.html](http://www.kalital.com/Text/Writing/Whiteness.html).

7. Lisa Nakamura, “‘Where Do You Want to Go Today?’: Cybernetic Tourism, the Internet, and Transnationality,” in *Race in Cyberspace*, ed. Beth E. Kolko, Lisa Nakamura, and Gilbert B. Rodman (New York: Routledge, 2000), 15–26; Lisa Nakamura, “Race In/For Cyberspace: Identity Tourism and Racial Passing on the Internet,” *Works and Days* (spring/fall 1995). *MUD* is an acronym for “multi-user domain” and *MOO* for “MUD, object-oriented.” Both are virtual spaces or communities in which a participant chooses an avatar or virtual character or assumes another identity. In her study of LambdaMOO, Nakamura observes that participants who chose a “race” as part of their identity profile

were subject to accusations of introducing “politics” into the virtual space. See “Race In/For Cyberspace: Identity Tourism and Racial Passing on the Internet,” [www.English.iup.edu/publications/works&days/index.html](http://www.English.iup.edu/publications/works&days/index.html).

8. Nakamura, “‘Where Do You Want to Go Today?’” 25 (emphasis in original).

9. *Ibid.*, 21–22, 16.

10. Unfortunately, Land Rover of South Africa (now a division of the Ford Motor Company) would not grant permission for the reproduction of the advertisement referred to here. For more information about this controversial ad and to view the image, see *Adbusters*, no. 34 (March–April 2001): 38. It also appeared in “Bust in the Wind,” *Harpers*, no. 1815 (August 2001): 23.

11. Alondra Nelson, “Braving the New World–AfroFuturism: Beyond the Digital Divide,” in *Race and Public Policy*, ed. Makani Themba (Oakland, Calif.: Applied Research Center, 2000): 37–40.

12. Evelyn Hammonds, interview with author, 23 April 2001, Cambridge, Mass.

13. James C. Williams, *At Last, Recognition in America: A Reference Handbook of Unknown Black Inventors and Their Contribution to America* (Chicago: B.C.A., 1978), 1:27–28. For more on John Thompson, see [www.lingoworks.com](http://www.lingoworks.com). See Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England, 1994), esp. chap. 3.

14. Ron Eglash, *African Fractals: Modern Computing and Indigenous Design* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1999).

15. Ishmael Reed, interview by Gaga [Mark S. Johnson], in *Conversations with Ishmael Reed*, ed. Bruce Dick and Amritjit Singh (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1995), 51.

16. Kasimir Malevich, “From Cubism and Futurism to Suprematism: The New Realism in Painting,” in Harrison and Wood, *Art in Theory*, 169.

17. John O’Brien, “Ishmael Reed,” in Dick and Singh, *Conversations with Ishmael Reed*, 16.

18. Ishmael Reed, *Mumbo Jumbo* (1972; reprint, New York: Scribner, 1996), 211.

19. *Conversations with Ishmael Reed*, 53.

20. Sāmi Ludwig, *Concrete Language: Intercultural Communication in Maxine Hong Kingston’s “The Warrior Woman” and Ishmael Reed’s “Mumbo Jumbo”* (New York: Peter Lang, 1996), 320.

21. Ludwig, *Concrete Language*, 319.

22. *Ibid.*

23. The term *Afro-futurism* was coined by Mark Dery in 1993 in an introductory essay that accompanied an interview with cultural critics Tricia Rose and Greg Tate and theorist and sci-fi writer Samuel Delany. See “Black to the Future: Interviews with Samuel R. Delany, Greg Tate, and Tricia Rose,” in “Flame Wars: The Discourse of Cyberculture,” ed. Mark Dery, *South Atlantic Quarterly* 94.4 (1993): 735–78; quotation at 738. Though this catchall term was first used by Dery in 1993, the currents that comprise it existed long before. See Kowdo Eshun, “Motion Capture (Interview),” in *More Brilliant Than the Sun: Adventures in Sonic Fiction*, 175–93 (London: Quartet, 1998). An extensive list of Afrofuturist resources has been compiled by Kali Tal at [www.afrofuturism.net](http://www.afrofuturism.net).

24. This phrase is taken from my description of the listserv, which can be found at [www.groups.yahoo.com/group/afrofuturism](http://www.groups.yahoo.com/group/afrofuturism).

25. The focus of the listserv was initially on science fiction metaphors and technocultural production in the African diaspora and expanded from there into a freewheeling discussion of any and all aspects of contemporary black life. A series of moderators—including Paul D. Miller, Nalo Hopkinson, Ron Eglash, and David Goldberg—gave generously of their time and energy in periodically setting themes for the list to consider in the first year of its existence. Now three years old and still going strong, the AfroFuturism list continues to evolve: recent moderators have included Sheree Renee Thomas and Alexander Weheliye.

Organized by Alondra Nelson, AfroFuturism|Forum, “a critical dialogue on the future of black cultural production,” was held at New York University on 18 September 1999 as part of the Downtown Arts Festival. This project was made possible by assistance from the Peter Norton Family Foundation as well as the American Studies and Africana Studies programs at NYU. The panels focused on various aspects of African diasporic digital culture. Participants included Beth Coleman, Kodwo Eshun, Leah Gilliam, Jennie C. Jones, Raina Lampkins-Fielder, Kobena Mercer, Tracie Morris, Erika Dalya Muhammad, Alondra Nelson, Simon Reynolds, Tricia Rose, Franklin Sirmans, and Reggie Cortez Woolery.

26. “Filling the Sky with Islands: An Interview with Nalo Hopkinson,” [www.space.com/sciencefiction/books/hopkinson\\_intv\\_000110.html](http://www.space.com/sciencefiction/books/hopkinson_intv_000110.html).

27. Amanda Carlson, “Amongst and Between Culture: The Art of Fatimah Tuggar,” unpublished essay, 1999.

28. “This Heart Drug Is Designed for African Americans,” *Business Week*, 26 March 2001.



