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Imaginative Rhetorical Invention In The 21st Century: An Analysis Of Afrofuturism And Black Utopian Thought In A Black Lady Sketch Show As An Avenue Toward Black Liberation

Natalie Weathers
Syracuse University

Abstract

Inspired by recent events following the deaths of unarmed Black bodies killed at the hands of police officers and white vigilante citizens (Griffith, 2020; Oppel, 2020; BBC, 2020) this thesis seeks to validate the seemingly impossible aspirations of Black struggle and liberation in attempt to dismantle white supremacist ideology and oppression. Grounded in rhetorical theory emphasizing the imagination and canon of invention alongside critical perspectives of Afrofuturism and Black utopian thought, this thesis demonstrates the liberatory power of the Black American imagination within the United States in the 21st century through an analysis of *A Black Lady Sketch Show* (2019).

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By

Natalie Weathers

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Table of Content

Chapter 1

Introduction

21st century technologies have introduced a new era of creativity that invites previously marginalized perspectives to public domains of epistemology. Inventions such as the internet and social media allow anyone to make their values and beliefs available to the world, and alternative approaches to traditional curriculums have permitted educational institutions and businesses to sustain operation in the midst of a global pandemic. In addition to the physical development that has taken place, the turn of the century has also introduced new cultural developments, especially for Black Americans. The natural hair movement, Black Lives Matter, and the surge in Black-owned businesses are indicative of a desire to uplift Black communities which have historically been disparaged by dominant society. Afrofuturism and Black Utopian Thought are technologies of the imaginative that have also gained traction in the 21st century, and this thesis will demonstrate how the use of such technologies in *A Black Lady Sketch Show* (2019) are capable of rhetorically influencing Black liberation.

Literature Review

Afrofuturism & Black Utopian Thought

The rhetorical histories of Afrofuturism and Black Utopian Thought manifest from the realistic and imagined experiences of Black American people. Coined in 1994 by Mark Dery, a

science fiction author and cultural critic, Afrofuturism was introduced to characterize the abstract parallels between Black American histories and science fictional creativity. Dery's introduction of the term came during an interview with Black American science fiction authors—Samuel Delany, Greg Tate, and Tricia Rose—in which he discussed the need for Black American voices to tell stories about culture, technology, and things to come (Dery, 1994). Essentially, Dery—a white man—saw the connection between his work in science fiction and the actual lived experiences of Black American people and from this connection begin to ask why so few Black science fiction authors existed at that time.

> *This is especially perplexing in light of the fact that African Americans, in a very real sense, are the descendants of alien abductees; they inhabit a sci-fi nightmare in which unseen but no less impassable force fields of intolerance frustrate their movements; official histories undo what has been done; and technology is too often brought to bear on Black bodies: branding, forced sterilization, the Tuskegee experiment, and tasers come readily to mind). – Mark Dery*

In the same interview, however, he also asks whether "a community whose past has been deliberately rubbed out, and whose energies have subsequently been consumed by the search for legible traces of its history, can imagine possible futures?" This thesis explores a possible response to this question via an analysis of 21st century Afrofuturist creativity.

As a relatively new and expanding technology, Afrofuturism has been interpreted and applied in different ways. While Afrofuturism began as a conversation between science fiction authors, it has been adopted and reinterpreted to serve in different contexts. Within this study, Afrofuturism is defined according to two scholars who emphasize its non-physical effects. The first is Dr. Isiah Lavender III who describes it as "a spiritual technology that produces knowledge

by using different truths that have been arranged systematically to show how the non-physical world works in tandem with the material world and by applying this information for practical ends such as freedom" (2019). To describe Afrofuturism as a spiritual technology is to indicate that its effects extend beyond physical existence into metaphysical existence, or the "non-physical world." In addition, Lavender notes the production of knowledge that comes from using different truths that have been arranged systematically, meaning there is something to learn from alternative perspectives that exist beyond our physical being. Lavender's definition is cross applied with Ytasha Womack (2013) who defines Afrofuturism as "an intersection of imagination, technology, the future, and liberation, [in which] Afrofuturists redefine culture and notions of Blackness for today and the future [by combining] elements of science fiction, fantasy, Afrocentricity, and magic realism with non-Western beliefs" (2013). Womack's interpretation speaks to the intersectionality of Afrofuturism and specifically the use of "imagination, technology, the future, and liberation" to "redefine culture and notions of Blackness" meaning Afrofuturism is capable of serving as a tool for rhetorical effects. This study will explore the rhetorical potential of Afrofuturism, and specifically the way the canon of invention manifests in the use of imaginative elements within the television series *A Black Lady Sketch Show*.

Consequently, this thesis also explores Black Utopian Thought (BUT). In his metanalysis titled *Black Utopia: The History of an Idea from Black Nationalism to Afrofuturism (*2019*),* Alex Zamalin revisits the history of Black imaginations during slavery until the 1900s beginning with Martin Robinson Delany. Delany was among the first to publish writing which projected Black escape from slavery to the new world. In this new world, Black people could live with the advantages granted to white people and finally experience liberation. When life beyond slavery

became a reality in the 1860s, Delany and other scholars assessed the society around them and realized that the constraints of race went beyond physical bondage to social construction, named white supremacy. With this new perspective, BUT redefined liberation to include social equality. Examples of such perspectives include Edward Bellany's *Looking Back* (1888) which told the story of a white nationalist who travelled 100 years into the future to find a socialist America; and Pauline Hopkins' *Of One Blood: or The Hidden Self* (1903) who described a hidden, and therefore uncolonized, civilization in Africa in which Black culture was revered. This form of liberation became more tangible as intellectual activists like Frederick Douglas and W.E.B. DuBois began writing policy literature which reconstructed identity loss as access to new knowledge (Eckel, 2016). By doing so, DuBois and Douglas created foundational avenues for Black people to begin redefining themselves and their quests for liberation. Black Utopian Thought, then, could be understood as a foundation of Afrofuturism in the sense that it affords the ability to go beyond the science fiction genre and into a cultural moment and movement.

Rhetorical Imagination and the Canon of Invention

This thesis draws from Josh Gunn's analysis of the rhetorical imagination and fantasy theme (2016) cross applied with Aristotle's canon of invention as its theoretical foundation. Gunn's analysis revisits the history of the imagination within rhetorical theory beginning with Aristotle's "phantasia" and concluding with Bormann's concept of "symbolic convergence." Gunn ultimately reveals a connection between how we interpret our world and how those interpretations manifest into dreams or fantasies. Studies of the imagination began in psychoanalytic research about child development and self-awareness where it was interpreted as desires that develop after a person becomes aware of the Self and Other (Lacan, 1977). The

differences that emerge between the Self and Other are endless but are often drawn from our personal life experiences. Within the exploration of these differences, the imagination is discovered. Originally, the imagination was deemed useless, but when imaginative elements were analyzed further, they were interpreted as symbols which often derive from our social conditioning or cultural exposure. Robert Bale's group research revealed that "just as the individual dreams during the day and night about events that do not presently exist, so groups create fantasies that help them cope with their social realities" (Gunn, 2003).

Bormann adopted Bale's perspective to develop the notion of symbolic convergence (Bormann, 1972), "a theory of invention that posits the collective imaginary as the principal and primary locus of suasive movement." In other words, Bormann invested in the idea that if a community could dream together, they could also work together to make that dream become a reality. This thesis analyzes the way Afrofuturism and Black Utopian Thought expands symbolic convergence within the context of the imagination to invent societal possibilities that have previously never existed. Black Americans are a collective group that has maintained its cultural existence by investing in hope and dreams that build their cultural presence. Within the 21st century alone, previously impossible histories have been made by Black Americans who were once legally denied their right to humanity: Barack Obama held one of the most powerful positions in the world, Beyonce broke the world record for most Grammys (the highest musical award) earned by an artist in a single lifetime, and *A Black Lady Sketch Show* became the first comedic sketch series written, produced, and starring a predominately Black female cast. By investing in the possibilities rather than realities of Black American experiences, Afrofuturism and Black Utopian Thought gain the ability to imagine and invent avenues for achieving Black liberation.

Black Metaphysical Existence and Black Liberation

Before delving into this thesis, it is important to establish the cultural context from which this research derives. As a Black American woman having resided in the United States my entire life, I prioritize the Black American experience in references of Blackness. In addition, the primary resources used within this study use Black American history as their foundational context: Afrofuturism and Black Utopian Thought were developed based on Black histories in the United States. Lavender (2019) describes these histories as the "hyperreal violence loop" in which "the unreality, the outlandishness, the implausibility of [our traumatic past through abduction, chattel enslavement, failed reconstruction, Jim Crow, the war on drugs, mass incarceration, police brutality, and other forms of racist prejudice and discrimination] feel science fictional in that readers cannot tell where reality ends and fiction begins" (Lavender, 2019). While every aspect of Black American history isn't violent, the hyperreal violence loop is the reason why the creativity of Afrofuturism and Black Utopian Thought became visible. For the purpose of this study, the Black American experience, and particularly the hyperreal violence loop, is personified as Blackness in order to isolate racial identity from personal experience in efforts to avoid essentializing all Black people.

The personification of Blackness is derived from *Queer Times, Black Futures* (2019), in which Kara Keeling introduces temporal states of racial and cultural awareness: *In the Dark*, *At Home*, and *Into the World*. Within this analysis, Keeling identifies ways in which Black American experiences connect to futurity and suggests that there are stages of awareness the Black racial identity encounters during this process. The *In the Dark* stage describes a lack of

self-awareness whereas Blackness is subject to assimilate into white supremacy, or Eurocentric domination. The second stage, *At Home*, introduces a transition from the "dark" into a state of awareness that realizes Blackness doesn't have an official place or home in this world, and it is therefore free to reside anywhere in the world. The final stage, *Into the World*, is thus an awareness of the endless possibilities available to Blackness because it doesn't have an official home. By personifying Blackness as racial and cultural awareness, the use of the term "Blackness" becomes a relative entity, ultimately meaning it's subjective. To reiterate, this thesis seeks to explore an avenue of Black liberation, not all avenues of Black liberation. And from this understanding of Blackness, defining Black liberation become possible. Black liberation is thus subjectively defined as the ability for Black people to live without cultural restraint. It is the ability for Black people to express themselves without the influence of white supremacy which historically and currently disparages the Black identity as inferior to whiteness, or Eurocentric perspectives.

Plan of Study

The following chapter will expand upon the critical perspective and theoretical background for the thesis while introducing the case study and analytical approach. Chapter 3 contains the analysis of A Black Lady Sketch Show with summaries and identification of the themes. Chapter 4 and 5 then conclude this study through a discussion of the findings, limitations, and future research suggestions.

Chapter 2

Rhetorical Theory and Critical Perspective

Rhetorical Theory: Imagination and Invention

The historic relationship between rhetoric and imaginative thinking within Western societies has been interpreted to exist for centuries beginning with Aristotle's discussion of "phantasia" which is said to play a role in the creation of desire that leads to movement (Nussbaum, 1978). However, discussions of imaginative thinking remained relatively insignificant until Jacques Lacan brought rhetoric into psychoanalysis. Within Lancanian psychoanalysis, the imaginary was interpreted as a stage of development and a shared social order of the psyche. Lacan believed children experienced the imaginary as "the mirror" stage in their social development whereas the child's mind produces a "fragmented, incoherent collection of desires and memories, [that] happen upon an image of herself in a 'looking glass' or reflective surface" (Gunn, 2003). Essentially Lacan saw the imaginary as a milestone of psychoanalytic development in which a person becomes aware of their individual Self and thus can begin making comparisons between themselves and the Other (i.e. what they aren't). Within this stage, a person can begin imagining realities to pursue. Although some critiques—including that of Lacan— identified potential for the imaginary to become deceptive of reality, others invested in its enlightenment and expanded its application. Castoriadis argued that the social imaginery is what is most distinct about humanity and on this basis, humans can realize their freedom and autonomy (Castoriadis, 1998). More specifically, Castoriadis identified the imaginary as "the creative, instituting capacity of individuals to collectively make the world" (Gunn, 2003). Scholars analyzed and criticized the imaginary within different contexts, but the idea of the

imaginary as capable of producing aspects of our world was further elaborated by Giambattista Vico.

Vico's introduction of the *sensus communis* is described as "an epistemological principle which united imagination, language, and social institutions in a dynamic, holistic relationship analogous to simultaneity of invention, figurality, and organization that occurs in oral performance (Shaeffer, 1990). Senus Communis is Latin for "common sense" and essentially refers to our general perception of things. According to Vico, the sensus communis is a "place of arguments" capable of being used by rhetors to invent arguments because it is also based in language. From Vico's senus communis, we realize that our perception of reality is capable of being rhetorically influenced and that that influence derives from various places including the imagination, language, and social institutions. The concept of inventing ideas based on language was expanded in the 20th century by Kenneth Burke whose discussion of symbolic action shifted the locus of rhetorical influence from arguments to symbols as a means of evoking shared meaning (Campbell, 2001). The canon of invention (Ilie, 2006) could then be reinterpreted as a general suasive process, "consciously intended and unconsciously apprehended which deals in matters of intersubjectivity"; meaning, rhetors tools for argumentation could extend beyond language into symbols. Bormann analyzed symbols as tools of rhetorical invention in the context of group fantasies to conceive "symbolic convergence" --a "theory of invention that posits the collective imaginary as the principle and primary locus of suasive movement" (Gunn, 2003). Within Afrofuturism and Black Utopian Thought, symbols or "codes" are foundational for creative expression because they articulate the realities of Blackness in imaginative, and thus endless ways (Womack, 2013; Lavender, 2016). This study will expand the use of Bormann's

theory of symbolic convergence as a tool of invention, to interpret the Afrofuturist and Black Utopian codes within *A Black Lady Sketch Show* as means for creating social realities of Black liberation.

Afrofuturism

Originally defined as "speculative fiction that treats African-American themes and addresses African-American concerns in the context of twentieth century techno-culture—and, more generally, African American signification that appropriates images of technology and a prosthetically enhanced future," Afrofuturism describes the intersections of Black realities within science fictional possibilities (Dery, 1994). It is a spiritual technology that has evolved to reimagine and transform traditionally anti-Black, anti-Afrocentric spaces such as American politics, medicine, academia, media, and essentially all other aspects of life. This thesis adopts Afrofuturism as a critical perspective for analyzing the Black liberatory power in *A Black Lady Sketch Show*.

Retrospectively, Afrofuturism is observable in the work of 19th century authors and activists such as Frederick Douglas, Martin Delany, and W.E.B. DuBois. The work each of these individuals, in conjunction with others, produced the foundations for Black Utopian Thought or speculative fiction. The work and influence of these cultural creators is expanded in the next section.

At the turn of the 20th century, Sun Ra introduced more embodied forms of Afrofuturism which demonstrated its tangible possibilities. Sun Ra's contributions are primarily documented in his music and films which depict Egyptian mythology and futuristic elements of science fiction (Youngquist, 2016). His most famous film, *Space is the Place* (1974) depicts a reality in which music is a temporal transportation device, waiting to transport those who wish to be

liberated. Throughout the film Sun Ra transports himself to different moments in history and he attempts to teach Black communities new liberating avenues but is met with challenges that arise from the effects of European colonization—primarily obsession with whiteness and material gain. Eventually Sun Ra is able to liberate a handful of Black people by transporting them to "space," a place where there is infinite possibility.

As the concept of Afrofuturism was adopted by Black communities and individuals, its tangible possibilities expanded. Within the 21st century, Afrofuturism can be directly referenced in art exhibits, social media pages, music, and film. As a relatively new and expanding technology, Afrofuturism has an array of definitions ranging across various disciplines. According to Delan Bruce, associate editor at UCLA, Afrofuturism is "the story of musicians, artists, writers, philosophers, fashion icons, filmmakers, costume and set designers, actors, activists, and academics who have believed in a better future for Black people—and for all people" (Delan, 2020). Bruce goes on to say Afrofuturism can be understood as a "wide-ranging social political, and artistic movement that dares to imagine a world where African-descended peoples and their culture play a central role in the creation of the world." Bruce's interpretation is widely supported by the creations by Afrofuturist creatives who internalize and produce that which they can imagine or reimagine in the world around them. Octavia Butler, a Black science fiction novelist, is an example of such creatives. Butler's work often centers Black characters in alternate societies in which the experiences of Blackness is reimagined in new futures. Sometimes the futures are utopian while other times dystopias are the center of her creative frame. This fluid choice is consistent with Afrofuturism's goal to introduce endless possibilities, whatever they may be.

Through its complexity however, Afrofuturist ideology consistently maintains two components, science fiction and Black culture. The science fiction aspects of Afrofuturism are similar to what you'd expect of any sci-fi production, except that it incorporates a Black American perspective. The popularization of science fiction as a genre became more frequent in the 1920s by authors such as Hugo Gernsback and H.G. Wells, however some believe its roots reach back to the early 1800s beginning with *Frankstein* published in 1818. Regardless of the specific *year* in which science fiction was conceived, the social stratosphere of its conception contained explicit representations of racial prejudice and discrimination. In the 1800s, majority of Black people couldn't read or write by law; and those who could had trouble finding publishers to support their ideology. The existence and perspectives of Black people were still suppressed in a way that limited their ability to effectively contribute to this new trend; so, while science fiction produced by Black minds existed, it was not acknowledged in the same way as Gernsback, Wells, and Shelley which validates the significance of incorporating Black culture into the genre now.

When academic scholars grew to interpret Afrofuturism as epistemology, it evolved into more contemporary expressions that connected with institutions beyond Africana studies. Renaldo Anderson and Charles E. Jones edited a collection of peer-reviewed pieces which demonstrate Afrofuturist interpretations. In *Afrofuturism 2.0: The Rise of Astro-Blackness* (2016*)*, we experience the many truths and interpretations validated through Afrofuturism such as the work of Tiffany Barber. Barber introduced a new form of discourse in "Cyborg Grammar?: Reading Wangechi Mutu's *Non je no regrette rien* through *Kindred*" as she interpreted the cyborg imagery in Mutu's art using a character in Octavia Butler's novel *Kindred*. Through Barber's analysis, the audience is giving a new interpretation or truth, in which the

generally fictional and distorted cyborg becomes an analogous friend to previously outcasted Black bodies. By comparing Black bodies to cyborgs, Barber not only brings imagined images to life, but the qualities of those images. Cyborgs are products of non-human and human experimentation, where they lose the purity of either existence, but gain a resilient strength as a result of the fusion. Black bodies are comparable to cyborgs because they too were experimented on as humans and non-humans and have demonstrated a unique resilience as a result. When Black bodies are compared to cyborgs in Barber's analysis, the result is a reimaged perspective or narrative of Blackness which creates grounds for more positive self-identification.

Other Afrofuturist creations also introduce what could become possible via a changed perspective. The work of Ester Jones speaks to the power of perspectives in "Africana Women's Science Fiction and Narrative Medicine: Difference, Ethics, and Empathy," as she analyzes the relationship between literature and medicine. In a similar way to Barber and other Afrofuturists, Jones explains contextual history for the mistreatment and degradation of Blackness before introducing an area in modern society in which we can reimagine this history. Jones analyzed the way literary depictions of Blackness influenced medical literature and how that literature has been perpetuated across generations ultimately maintaining a single narrative: Black inferiority. She goes on to propose new approaches to developing public health and leaves the audience to continue questioning "the assumptions that shape our narratives of human identity and belonging, to redefine who belongs with a community of care, and to develop an ethical system that makes humane, ethical action the standard for all people" (Jones, 2016). Such a publication is a direct example of a changed perspective and reimagined future also referred to as Afrofuturism and Black utopian thought.

In 2019, Isiah Lavender III published *Afrofuturism Rising: The Literary Prehistory of a Movement* in which he explains the transformative nature of Afrofuturism from a genre of science fiction to the foundation of a cultural moment and movement. His analysis includes four elements of Afrofuturism that I've adopted for this thesis: decoding, alien abduction, pocket universes, and trickster technology. Due to its imaginative and cultural foundation, Lavender identifies the nature of Afrofuturism as similar to "code-breaking" in that one must learn to see and understand beyond the obvious to experience its rhetorical influence. Black Americans have historically relied on hidden messages to maintain cultural existence which European aliens tried to eliminate via abduction and enslavement. These codes came in various forms including writings by Afrofuturist authors like Martin Delany; political activism by individuals like Phillis Wheatley, Olaudah Equiano, and Benjamin Banneken; or revolutionaries such as Nat Turner and David Walker. While at the time, they were not called "Afrofuturists," through the decoding of their collective words and behavior we come to understand that they possessed Afrofuturist ideology which contributes to the foundation of the movement today. Beyond coded messages, Lavender identifies networking, alternate space, and science as characteristics of Afrofuturism throughout his novel. He elaborates on these characteristics through the description of "alien abductions, pocket universes, and trickster technology" which ultimately explain the link between Black cultural history and science fiction within Afrofuturism. "Alien abduction" references a sci-fi themed analysis of European colonization within which Europeans are interpreted as aliens who invaded Africa, then synthesized racism and race to maintain control (Lavender, 2019). This is the contextual and cultural foundation from which Afrofuturism is built: Black Americans are the abductees and causalities of European alien invasion. Other scholars such as Glissant (Drabinski, 2019), DuBois (1999), and Green (2018) have also

published analyses similar to this reinterpretation of the Black American past, and the goal of such interpretations remains the same: Black people are products of such a catastrophic cultural disruption that their existence and relationship to the Americas is alien or other-worldly, and consisting of unique epistemological perspectives.

Using "alien abduction" as the cultural basis for Afrofuturism, the use of pocket universes and trickster technology as a mode of survival is conceivable. Pocket universes can be interpreted as individualized accounts of Black existence under European abduction and the strive for liberation (Lavender, 2016). They aren't limited to individual interactions and relationships, but extend beyond the physical self into spiritual or metaphysical mediums such as emotions or other formless experiences observable via affect (Keeling, 2009). Lastly, trickster technology describes the methods employed by Black people to manipulate their environments for their own benefit. Lavender's examples included a runaway slave changing their name, Henry Brown escaping slavery via a mailed box, Henry Bibb using skin-tone to pass as white in order to help free others, and the list goes on. "Whatever else the trickster might be—shape-shifter or disrupter of the status quo—they are also a disassembler of meaning in our future images, translating and transferring the hope impulse into Afrofuturistic code" (97). Thus, trickster technology describes the methods employed by Black people to achieve liberation.

Within this thesis, Afrofuturism is defined according to Lavender who describes it as "a spiritual technology that produces knowledge by using different truths that have been arranged systematically to show how the non-physical world works in tandem with the material world and by applying this information for practical ends such as freedom" (30). From this perspective, Afrofuturism is experienced spiritually through the messages we consume and produce, meaning it survives in discourse as most ideologies do. Importantly, I consider Afrofuturism to be a form

of magic, or something so creatively influential in its existence that it can never be fully defined or understood, only experienced and analyzed retrospectively. In addition to Lavender's definition, this thesis also adopts the perspective of Ytasha Womack who defines Afrofuturism as "an intersection of imagination, technology, the future, and liberation, [in which] Afrofuturists redefine culture and notions of Blackness for today and the future [by combining] elements of science fiction, fantasy, Afrocentricity, and magic realism with non-Western beliefs" (2013). For Womack, Afrofuturism intersects multiple forms of expression as resources for Afrofuturist to pursue present and future possibilities that extend into science fictional and fantasy spheres of thought.

Within her historic analysis, *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture* Womack uses a non-traditional academic approach to understand Afrofuturism by providing a structured analysist of its history and concepts. From Womack, we learn that Afrofuturism is a response to the historic disruption and erasure of Black culture and was created to redefine notions of Blackness today and in the future. Initially, Afrofuturism remained in non-academic sci-fi circles that focused on imagery and storytelling, but as the internet became a tool for mass communication and expression, the political potential of the concept became more tangible. Within this new wave, Black history and other social dynamics were shared using a new perspective. During the Middle Passage and enslavement, Black people lost a lot of agency in shaping the world. After degrading their humanity and erasing their cultural knowledge, Europeans created race and racial categories to further define the social hierarchy and establish a legacy of dominance. Even after slavery was abolished, white people used race as means for institutionalized anti-Black prejudice and discrimination resulting in a world where everything Black is bad and everything white is good. This reality is depressing and lacks opportunity for

Black pride because within this narrative, Black people are *only* cultureless victims of genocide and exploitation. But Black people *weren't* just victims who had things done to them until they received a white savior and developed a consciousness; they were and *are* human beings who are very much aware of their oppression today as they were in past. The difference today is that we have technologies and concepts which provide alternative perspectives of history and potential lifestyles.

Afrofuturism reimagines realities to reveal alternative futures or a changed perspective of historic events. Using an Afrofuturist perspective, one could envision the histories of Black people and the identity of Blackness as completely different from the way it's traditionally been described. Using an Afrofuturist critical perspective, Europe's "imperialism" could be described as an "alien invasion or abduction" and Black Americans could identify as "double aliens" rather than "social outcasts." Womack challenges any hesitation about redefining the past by asking about the significance of maintaining tradition: "If your great-grandmother came to a new planet from America, does [America's] history have any context several billion miles away? This stretched my imagination, and this exercise in transcending familiar boundaries is an experience that Afrofuturists seek and encourage" (Womack, 2013). This study accepts the invitation to redefine Blackness in hope of demonstrating avenues in which Black liberation can be achieved. The critical perspective and application of Afrofuturism is thus rooted in this idea of fluidity and possibility which becomes tangible through imagination. In other words, the selected case study is analyzed using a perspective which looks not at what *is*, but what *can be*.

Black Utopian Thought

Alex Zamalin is among the first to discuss *Black* utopias as a genre of utopian thought in *Black Utopia: A History of an Idea from Black Nationalism to Afrofuturism* (2019). Within each

chapter Zamalin reviews literature encompassing Black liberation rhetoric surrounding societal infrastructure—otherwise known as Black utopian thought. Zamalin describes Black Utopian Thought as "detailed new visions of collective life and racial identity…[having] outlined futuristic ways of being…[capable of warning us] about the disastrous ways of contemporary life, while espousing radical notions of freedom" (Zamalin, 2019). This thesis extends the application of Black Utopian Thought to a mediated source which also encompasses themes of Black liberation rhetoric surrounding futurist living.

Similar to Afrofuturism, Black Utopian Thought (BUT) envisions futures in which the impossible becomes possible. As a less fluid genre, however, BUT is more specifically oriented toward utopian concepts that describe governance and community. The word "utopia" is a Greek term meaning "no place" and it was first introduced by Sir Thomas More in his masterpiece titled *Utopia* (1516). Within the piece, More described a well-detailed society that was so real it was interpreted as a place that would never exist— "no place." After More, others began to introduce their own utopias that depicted their values and interests: Francis Bacon described a mental utopia of intellectual advancement and scientific knowledge in *New Atlantis* (1627) and Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels' *The Communist Manifesto* (1848) became a utopian blueprint for their communist community. Zamalin describes America as one of the first physical utopias because of how it disrupted the status quo with its democratic structure and the belief in exceptionalism. As the idea of America became a "real" place to live, people moved there and invested in. More specifically, small group communities such as the Shakers and the Oneida community realized they could build "small-knit enclaves organized around socialist economic ideas or countercultural familial organizations" (Zamalin, 2019).

Black Utopian Thought began in the late 1800s as a political conversation inspiring newly freed Black Americans to build their own society. Scholars such as Martin Delany (1812-1885), Edward Bellamy (1850-1898), and Pauline Hopkins (1859-1930) were instrumental in creating its foundation. Together, the work of these scholars demonstrates the foundational themes of BUT: visions of a new world, futuristic ways of being through access to political rights, and the embrace of the Black racial identity. Achieving freedom by entering a new world was a concept many enslaved Africans envisioned from the moment they arrived in the Americas (Green, 2018). This was a dream every African parent had for their African grandchild and every African grandchild had for their African sibling. The reason this dream became an evolved concept overtime is because as generations of enslavement stripped away cultural knowledge and bloodlines, the idea of what one would escape to became more and more of an imaginative place. Take a moment to envision their experience. Imagine being kidnapped by the blue-toothed people of planet Horizon. On Horizon, they strip you of your name, Earth languages, and practices via torture; and then reiterate that there is no possible way you're returning to Earth. As time passes, your idea of what freedom is would evolve. Maybe the first year, your goal was to leave Horizon by hijacking a spaceship. The second year, you hope to at least make it to another area on Horizon where you can reinstitute your culture and traditions. By the tenth year you might just be holding on to your name. And by the 3rd century, one could only imagine! One could only *imagine*.

Utopian thought became a mode of survival for Black Americans, and when Martin Delany introduced *Blake or the Huts of America* (1859)—a novel in which a young Black American escapes bondage, discovers his freedom, and leads a revolt to free the rest of his people—the imagined futures of Black people became possible. An analysis of Frederick

Douglass and Martin Delany's publications and activism, reveals their direct influence on BUT (Eckel, 2016). Together, Delany and Douglass expanded the application of Paul Gilroy's conception of the Atlantic as having the power of cultural erasure and evolution of identity or "counterculture of modernity" (Williams, 1979). Delany used the concept to imagine possible Black futures internationally, while Douglass befriended white allies to begin physically inventing Black futures in the context of the United States. In addition to Douglass and Delany's introduction of hope for freedom through a new world, Edward Bellamy and Pauline Hopkins also began fueling hope for imagined political rights and new government structures (Bellamy, 1888; Hopkins, 1903). The implementation of politics into Black utopian structures demonstrated hope in a future where Blackness could experience liberation. In some cases, such as Bellamy's *Looking Back*, political changes were made in the future; but in other cases, like *Hopkins' Of One Blood: or The Hidden Self*, these politics have always existed and still potentially exist in African societies. As the Black liberation movement (1920) began and Black Americans fought for civil rights, BUT scholars became critical of the underlying consequences racism had as an institution (Zamalin, 2019). Think back to the abduction by the blue-toothed people. Even after your descendants were freed from enslavement, they would feel out of place because the entirety of their new home, planet Blue-Tooth, is designed to reinforce their marginality and sub-class status. In this position, they are forced to either assimilate to the blue-tooth culture or begin building their own culture.

Another Black Utopian scholar is W.E.B. DuBois who was among the first 20th century authors to begin imagining intersections of identity and epistemology for the sake of building his own culture. In *the Comet* (1920), a Black man and white woman appear to be the last people alive after a comet hits Earth. They develop a relationship which almost overcomes racial

barriers until the white woman's father arrives with a group of white survivors and takes her away. The Black man is then joined by a Black woman who has also survived, and they go one to create a life together. From a BUT critical perspective, these two survivors represent an opportunity for Blackness to survive and create the future of a new society. Of all identities, two *Black* people were the ones meant to survive and find one another. This experience is similar to if your descendants on the planet Horizon experienced an apocalypse in which everything was destroyed, and they could build whatever they wanted while starting a new society. DuBois continued this theme in his books Darkwater (1920) and Dark Princess (1928) which was was groundbreaking, inspiring, and imaginative in a way that influenced future scholars to begin crafting such a society. BUT is a result of such imaginative scholarship and this thesis is an expansion of this epistemology. This study will demonstrate how BUT has been perpetuated within the 21st century through *A Black Lady Sketch Show* to imagine and invent future possibilities of Black Liberation.

Black Metaphysical Existence and Black Liberation

For centuries, Black people have been constrained by a hyperreal violence loop (Lavender, 2019) which diminished their existence to projections by others. The loop began when European aliens invaded the African world and abducted community members for dehumanizing labor in a new world. In this new world, the abducted members were brainwashed, and their memories erased over generations. By the time the enslaved Africans escaped, the universe had been reconstructed to possess ideologies in which they were now the aliens) responsible for any and all negativity that plagued the land: rape, thievery, laziness, disease, hypersexuality, low intelligence, ugliness, primitivity, and anything else in objection with what is

good and productive. Womack describes this identity state as “double alien” because not only were Black Americans alien to this new world in a physical sense, but they were also social aliens, incapable of normalization (Womack, 2013). Without the ability to become a social norm, Black American culture is driven to either assimilate or risk elimination, forcing the adoption of a survival-mode mentality. They overcame this with resilience and an undeniable ability to succeed: Put differently, the survival of Black people stood for one important message, that of hope.

Many people would define hope only in relation to struggle, but in Afrofuturism, it is the foundational element for life (Lavender, 2019). In a general sense, hope is defined as a belief in possibilities which will bring about change and, in most cases, that belief is based on previous encounters with overcoming. Hope in the Black American context holds a different power because of their double alien past. In a society where one is both alien and inhabitant, true change cannot be limited to overcoming a single moment, it must possess the roots and restructure the foundation both physically *and metaphysically*. Historically, most attempts to establish equality or acknowledge white supremacy have remained in the sphere of materiality: creating and changing laws, electing politicians, assessing the Black economy, or painting “Black Live Matter” on the street. But these acts can only bring about momentary change and Black hope was created to extend beyond just a moment. Black hope extends into the metaphysical where magic exists, and spirits reside.

In *Queer Times, Black Futures*, Keeling provides a meta-analysis of Black cultural manifestations and their ability to indicate a secret realm of life. At the start of her analysis, she subtly indicates an ending of the world and our current way of knowing by identifying elements of Black culture which describe various temporal spaces: “In the Dark,” “At Home,” and “Into

the World." Initially the audience may assume that these are quotes or phrases from the analysis, but by the end of the book I came to realize that they are in fact descriptions of ontological temporal states. *In the Dark,* describes a state in which a person is subconsciously adhering to the currently dominant temporality. Within this temporal space, a person isn't aware of the possibilities around them because they're living within a singular reality in order to survive the status quo. This is indicated primarily through the quote, "It's after the end of the world. Don't you know that yet?" The quote comes from Sun Ra, a character referred to by Keeling throughout the novel, who resides in a future beyond current circumstances that already exists but isn't realized by majority of the population. Sun Ra spends time attempting to transport Black individuals to this future because despite their adherence to the status quo, they subconsciously possess a knowledge which grants them access to this futuristic being. Through this temporal state, Keeling isn't indicating that others can't access this future, but is rather revealing that Black people, and particularly those with a Black experience, currently hold the knowledge to access a state of being which exists outside the status quo. This is the first time Keeling personifies Blackness.

The second time occurs within the *At Home* temporal space. *At Home* describes the state when a person realizes they don't have a fixed purpose and, therefore, is full of possibilities. This is evident through Keeling's analysis of the impact of European colonization on Black existence. She references Glissant's interpretation of trauma during the Middle Passage to explain how Black existence came to be and the reason it, in particular, unlocks access to futurity. During the Middle Passage and slavery (1518-mid 19th century), the trauma inflicted on African people warped their original cycle of being. Like most societies, Africans depended on cycles of generational knowledge to perpetuate their cultural existence: older generations teach younger

generations how to live, and those generations then become parents and teach the same things. When Europeans abducted and enslaved Africans in a new world (1518-1865), the generational cycle of knowledge was disrupted and forced to evolve. This ultimately created "a radical imagination [which] works with and through what exists in order to call forth something presently absent: a new relationship between and within matter" (34). In other words, in order to survive centuries of physical and metaphysical cultural disruption, enslaved Africans had to imagine and create ways to maintain their existence; and by doing so, they learned how to utilize the imagination to construct human realities in a way that has never been replicated. Keeling believes this radical imagination is captured within poetry and music, which are forms of expression that account for the relationship between existence and experience. This is the second time Keeling personifies Blackness and the first time she alludes to the Black experience as the preface of Blackness. This is important to differentiate because "Blackness" describes a certain understanding, and the experience is how that understanding is created. Within the At Home temporal space, Keeling acknowledges this unique power granted to the Black experience and quotes Glissant to characterize the experience:

> The abyss is also a projection of and a perspective into the unknown …This is why we stay with poetry…We know ourselves as part and as crowd, in an unknown that does not terrify. We cry our cry of poetry. Our boats are open, and we sail them for everyone (54).

Before arriving at the final temporal state, Keeling intentionally takes the opportunity to provide examples of how Black existence has been emphasized to reveal Blackness as an

experience. The majority of her analysis centers media references such as poetry, music, and iconic characters and figures, like Grace Jones which emphasize fluidity and possibility in Afrofuturist ways. These references set up the final temporal state which isn't a state at all. There are a number of quotes within the book which allude to the importance of prioritizing possibility over purpose insinuating that there is no "final place."

The *In the Dark* temporal space is a state where we don't belong and shouldn't be; it's the state of being that survived by assimilating to the circumstances of enslavement or the status quo. The *At Home* temporal space is a state that doesn't provide residential comfort, but is rather a temporary location to feel comfort: "Homelessness is our home" (54). The *At Home* state allowed Blackness to exist beyond the circumstances of enslavement via the production of a radical imagination. And the last temporal space, *Into the World,* is a state that cannot be articulated because it "exceeds its expression inevitably [and] also produces a surplus, one that cannot be seen or understood, but is nevertheless present as affect" (82). Because the last temporal space is located within possibility, it isn't directly described or defined, but is indeed impactful. Keeling embodies this affective temporality at the conclusion of the book where she describes each temporal state again except *Into the World,* which is written on a blank page containing no other text. It is as if she is inviting you to explore the possibility present within different temporalities. The *Into the World* state is where the radical imagination of Blackness continues to imagine and reimagine new ways of existing. Afrofuturism and BUT are products of this final state.

While this thesis doesn't expand on temporality and time like Keeling, it does support the personification of Blackness and its ability to access new sources of epistemology and ideology.

Black people experiencing Keeling's temporal states through their Blackness is an example of metaphysical existence. Being *In the Dark* is to experience a physical and metaphysical place where African community members were abducted and brainwashed. Their bodies *and* spirits were tormented for centuries in ways that transformed their ontology: life was no longer a gift of learning, but rather a repetitious striving to survive each moment. When displaced Africans escape this foreign hypnosis (i.e. white supremacy), they enter the *At home* state in which they are now aware of their double alien status. Within the *At Home* state they have accessed the aspects of their imagination which allows Blackness to exist beyond survival under white supremacy, and become semi-familiar with the world and culture surrounding them but are reminded that this isn't the final destination for rest and restoration. The *At Home* state is monopolized by materiality under which Blackness is mainly monetized and exploited: although Blackness has realized its creative ability, it limits itself to the what the status quo considers freedom to be. To free Black people from the constraints of race under white Supremacy, Black people must be freed from Blackness through a metaphysical liberation. Afrofuturists like Delany and Sun Ra have been encouraging us to leave this phase for decades and my thesis will highlight examples of ways in which Blackness is liberated in the 21st century. Before providing details of this analysis, I will elaborate on metaphysical liberation by officially defining Black liberation as it relates to this thesis.

The final stage of Keeling's temporal states is the *Into the World* state, which is an apt explanation to describe Black Liberation. Rhetoric surrounding Afrofuturism and BUT strongly emphasize fluidity and possibility. Fluidity prevents polarization and therefore stagnation at any point in time, ultimately creating endless possibility. The *Into the World* state is about imagining

and doing whatever you want because you can, which intensifies the significance of imagination and hope. For so long white Supremacy has catalyzed physical and metaphysical structures to reinforce the same ideology: religion, consumerism, exploitation, hierarchal power dynamics, racism, heteropatriarchy, etc. In order to break the singularity of this narrative, disruption and diversity must take control. Afrofuturism and BUT are invitations to disruption and diversity that manifest our wildest dreams to present the most exciting and transformative futures. Through the *At Home* state, Blackness was freed from assimilation, but through the Into the World state, Blackness has the ability to continue freeing: it's an active state of being which means it can't be limited to current material structures. Afrofuturism and BUT aren't just science fiction rhetoric for entertainment, they are avenues to what has yet to be such as aspiration, and hope, and eventually freedom. White supremacy is incorporated into every aspect of our existence, so for Black people to be liberated, they must access something which has yet to be. Therefore, Black liberation is the ability to exist so independently of what already is that the constraints of the current moment become irrelevant. When liberated, one can define themselves however they choose. They can live and travel wherever they want, choose to create or not create whatever and whenever they want, and the ethics of their previous existence is redesigned to evolve in different social contexts. This study demonstrates the manifestation of Black liberation through various forms of Afrofuturism and BUT in the 21st century.

Chapter 3

A Black Lady Sketch Show Analysis

A Black Lady Sketch Show is a sketch series originally released in 2019 that depicts Blackness in a whimsical world of multifaceted experiences. In interviews discussing the creation of the series, director and producer Robin Thede describes her intentional decisions to produce something in which Black female comedians are the forefront of the creation, rather than just participants in supporting roles (The View, 2019). More specifically, Thede wanted to create a space in which no one would feel marginalized by behaviors such as "mansplaining"—an often condescending and patronizing explanation given to a woman by a man—or the need to explain one's cultural references and practices. In addition, Thede speaks of the possibilities that have been granted through the production of *A Black Lady Sketch Show*, including the ability to reimagine and rewrite other Black cultural creations such as one of her favorite shows "227," a 1985 sitcom (The Wendy Williams Show, 2019). As the show came to fruition, Thede was cautious about the impact it might have on the narratives of Black people, so she made the decision to name the show "*A* Black Lady Sketch Show" opposed to just "Black Lady Sketch Show" as a way of emphasizing the collective experiences of Black woman while also acknowledging the subjectivity of the content. To maintain this emphasis, this study abbreviates *A Black Lady Sketch Show* as "aBLSS."

The first season of aBLSS consists of 6 episodes and over 20 sketches. Aside from the dystopia narrative in which four Black women—Robin Thede, Quinta Brunson, Ashley Nicole Black, and Gabrielle Dennis—are the only survivors of an apocalypse, aBLSS maintains an multifaceted development of Black experiences in alternative depictions. The depictions are

illustrated in 5-minute sketches that vary in their imaginative content. Within this study, three sketches were analyzed because of their ability to depict Afrofuturism and Black Utopian Thought. The first sketch, The Invisible Spy, is a 2-part sequal depicting Afrofuturism within social marginality; and the second two sketches depict Black Utopian Thought via an illustration of Black bodies in untraditional or currently impossible spaces. To conduct the analysis, each sketch was watched and annotated 10-15 times. Annotating included taking notes of the plots, actors, references of Black culture (verbal and non-verbal), and elements of the imagination (that which doesn't exist as part of our realities). After the annotations, the summaries of each sketch were developed and the Afrofuturist or Black Utopian elements were identified.

The Invisible Spy

"The Invisible Spy" is a sketch spread across two episodes in aBLSS and illustrates social invisibility reimagined as a secret strength. The plot centers Trinity (Ashley Nicole Black), a top agent in the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) who has been called into headquarters for a secret mission. The first sketch begins during Trinity's briefing of the mission, in which two supervisors (Quinta Brunson and Gina Torres) are describing a new target for her to pursue. Within the first few exchanges of dialogue, it becomes clear that Trinity's social invisibility is so strong that even her superiors can't recognize her: Quinta and Gina accidentally address Kelly Rowland, a technologist, instead of Trinity in the meeting. Once the confusion is cleared up, Gina describes Trinity as "incredible [because] her regular-looking face makes her nearly invisible in the field," and then goes on to say she's a legend in the office.

Immediately following this compliment, another office employee (Robin Thede) enters the room with a surprise birthday card for Trinity. Trinity attempts to inform Robin of her

mistake but is unsuccessful as indicated when Robin hands Trinity the card to sign and replies, "Make sure not to tell Trinity." As the mission debriefing continues, the details of the case contain references to Black pop culture such as when Gina compares the target's security tightness to Jada Pinkett Smith's mom's abs or the fact that the target's employer invented saying "skrrrt." The briefing concludes with an official introduction of the target known as "invisible man" who the CIA has been unable to ascertain any details about. Before Trinity leaves for her mission, her regularity is emphasized yet again when Quinta says, "I know where I know you from. You're my son's kindergarten teacher." To which Trinity replies, "You know me from meeting me a minute ago."

The next scene of the sketch shows Trinity entering the building where the invisible man is located. Her first task requires getting past a metal detector with her gun, which proves to be extremely easy when she walks around the detector and is barely noticed by the seated security guard who simply looks up at her and then looks away. The next task comes after Trinity learns that the invisible man isn't just a woman, but a *Black* woman. She enters a room monitored by a security camera and hears a voice over the intercom yell "you ain't slick! I see you, Trinity." After a short exchange, Trinity is presented with a seemingly standard laser obstacle, but as she begins working through the lasers, they change to require Black cultural activities such as Double Dutch or the Electric Slide. When Trinity finally comes face-to-face with the invisible man, she's taken back by the similarity in their appearance. A quick fight reveals the equivalence in not just the women's strength but their experiences: they both mention not having to fight so hard in a long time and the invisible man recalls her last opponent being easily distracted by "some chick in a long weave" and wandering away. Trinity attempts to conclude the fight by asking the invisible man if she actually enjoys working for her male boss and stating that no

matter what she does, she'll never truly be appreciated by him. She offers the invisible man a way to avoid taking responsibility for her boss's actions, but the invisible man tricks Trinity into looking away and escapes.

The second sketch featuring the Invisible Spy carries similar themes to the first whereas Trinity is pursuing a recluse target who has yet to be identified. This pursuit also includes moments in which Trinity's regularity is emphasized, however within this sketch, we see how regularity works against her. The scene begins in the midst of Trinity chasing the recluse, and during the chase, small inconveniences such as pedestrians standing in the way and a woman being unwilling to hold the door allows the recluse to gain distance. When the recluse runs into a clothing store, she's able to completely lose Trinity because customers assume Trinity to be an employee and approach her with questions and concerns. Finally, Trinity catches up to the recluse in a parking lot but becomes captivated by her beautiful appearance; with Trinity distracted, the recluse is able to tranquilize and capture her. Eventually it's revealed that the recluse is the invisible man in disguise, and that she has been in pursuit of Trinity since their last altercation. The scene concludes when CIA back-up arrive just as the invisible man is about to kill Trinity. In this moment, the power of regularity is once again re-emphasized as the invisible man eludes arrest because the CIA agents (both men) assume she's a cleaning woman and criticize Trinity for believing the invisible man could be *that* woman.

Invisibility: The "Invisible Spy" sketches demonstrate Afrofuturism with the theme of invisibility. Within the first minute of the sketch, the audience comes to understand invisibility as a description of experience rather than a prosaic adjective: Trinity isn't physically invisible but is described as invisible because of her social interactions within society where she is overlooked

even when being directly addressed in conversation. At the conclusion of the briefing in the first sketch, Quinta says she recognizes Trinity as her son's kindergarten teacher, to which Trinity replies, "no, you know me from meeting me a minute ago." This exchange is a clear demonstration of social marginalization—Trinity is so overlooked that even after meeting Quinta in a professional setting, she isn't distinguished enough for recognition moments later, as if she has disappeared or been invisible. Here, and throughout the sketch, social marginalization is coded as a "invisibility" to represent a lack of recognition. Within Afrofuturism, codes are often used to describe experiences because sometimes they capture the effect of the experience better than a prose explanation. By using the invisibility code, aBLSS already demonstrates its ability to be Afrofuturist within "the Invisible Spy" sketch. In addition, the use of rhetorical imagination is present in the audience's interpretation of the word "invisible." Because the term "invisibility" isn't used in a literal sense, the audience must join in on a collective fantasy (Gunn, 2003) of what invisibility can be imagined as: social marginality. Once the collective fantasy of invisibility is established, the possibilities surrounding that fantasy also become available to the audience. From this point, the audience can accept the invention of invisibility as a strength rather than a weakness, ultimately validating the possibility for Trinity's position as an invisible spy.

Rooted in Black Experience: Trinity's experience of invisibility is rooted in her experience as a Black woman facing societal marginalization. The use of Black experiences as the root of this sketch demonstrates another Afrofuturist theme. Afrofuturism exists as a response to the desire for Black experiences to be validated and reimagined (Womack, 2013). Therefore, in order for anything to be Afrofuturist, it must be rooted in a Black experience. The entire aBLSS series is rooted in Black experiences and within the "Invisible Spy" sketches, we see this illustrated

through Trinity's physical features and interactions with others. Trinity possesses two immediate physical features that directly reflect a Black experience: natural Black hair and a curvy body. Both of these physical features are Black woman characteristics that contribute to marginalization. Historically, hair has impacted women's perceived beauty and within the United States Eurocentric beauty standards have been considered superior for centuries. As a result, women who don't ascribe to Eurocentric beauty standards are considered less desirable and receive less attention. This theme was replicated in Invisible Spy when the Invisible Man recalled a fight with a male opponent that concluded when the opponent "spotted some chick with a long weave and wandered away." In addition to natural hair, Trinity has a curvy body, a characteristic Black women have advocated for during the last few decades. Similar to hair, women's body types contribute to their perceived beauty and are historically based on Eurocentric features which tend to be slender, or smaller than a size 6. By using an actress whose body isn't slender, aBLSS again depicts a narrative rooted in Black experience.

Furthermore, Trinity's interactions with others reflect invisibility rooted in a Black experience. Within the first sketch, Trinity evades a security guard who doesn't see her as capable of being a threat as indicated by his lackadaisical response to her walking around the metal detector. In the second sketch, Trinity's invisibility is comparably emphasized during her pursuit of the recluse, a slender woman wearing long, straight hair. During the pursuit, pedestrians make a path and hold the door open for the recluse, but don't reciprocate the same courtesy to Trinity. This experience again demonstrates the social marginalization of a Black experience.

The last illustration of this Afrofuturist theme is present in Trinity's altercation with the Invisible Man in the first sketch. During their fight, Trinity and the Invisible man share similar

strength and experiences which make them a suitable match for one another. The unique experiences present within Blackness are rarely comparable to experiences of other racial groups because of the unique history Black Americans share via the hyperreal violence loop (Lavender, 2016). While social marginalization isn't specific to a certain historic event, the reason a person or group may experience social marginalization can stem from the same source. Within Invisible Spy, Trinity and the Invisible Man share similar physical features and live within the same society, so their experience of invisibility is comparable. When they first meet face-to-face, Trinity asks, "what, are you supposed to be my evil twin?" To which the Invisible Man replies, "you wish, I can actually pull of this haircut." Aside from appearance, the women's physical strength and invisible abilities are relatable, as indicated by their fight and verbal affirmations: "I haven't had to fight this hard in years" and "damn girl, you're good." The last confirmation of their comparability is observable in the empathy Trinity extends when discussing the Invisible Man's employer. Trinity asks the Invisible Man if she "even likes working for Reynaldo" and says that despite how well she does her job, Reynaldo won't see the Invisible Man's worth. Trinity's empathy is indicative of her understanding the experience of invisibility or the strive to be recognized. The strive to be recognized in an environment which values your work, but not your personhood is familiar among many Black Americans who have attempted to assimilate to Eurocentric standards. By including this dynamic, the "Invisible Spy" sketch once again demonstrates its Black American roots and thus its Afrofuturism.

Establishing a cultural context for this sketch is also a demonstration of collective fantasies or group dreaming because in order for a group to dream together, they need to share a collective reality (Gunn, 2003). Within aBLSS, the hyperreal violence loop shared by Blackness,

is the source of reality from which the sketches derive, meaning the cultural context or group that is dreaming are those who identify with these experiences of Blackness.

Reimagine previously negative Black experiences: Finally, the inventive power of Afrofuturism is demonstrated in the reimagining of invisibility as a secret strength. A major theme and benefit of Afrofuturism is the reimagining of Blackness in new spaces because of its historically inferior position in American society. Within Invisible Spy, social marginalization and Black culture are reimagined as skill sets. Trinity is the top CIA agent in the field because of her ability to be "invisible." While we observe many ways in which her invisibility negatively impacts her, the entire sketch is based around Trinity's social marginalization as a top skill for undercover employment. The reimagining of this characteristic is Afrofuturist because it imagines and invents a new space in which a Black experience is celebrated rather than degraded or presented with shame. Another example of this theme is illustrated when Trinity encounters lasers in the first sketch. Initially, the lasers appear to require standard flexibility, but as Trinity completes the obstacle, the lasers transform to require Black cultural knowledge: double dutch and the Electric slide. By making Black knowledge the key to successfully evading lasers, "Invisible Spy" again demonstrates the inventive power of an Afrofuturist imagination. Historically, Black culture has been marginalized within the United States, ultimately minimizing the significance of perpetuating it. By reimagining Black culture as a required skill, aBLSS creates a new space in which Black culture is not only appreciated, but necessary, thus demonstrating Afrofuturism.

Gang Orientation

"Gang Orientation" is a sketch that reimagines gang affiliation as a professional career recognized by the government and other employment regulators. The sketch takes place in a

standard car garage where a “Reef” gang orientation is taking place. The Reef gang consists exclusively of Black females dressed in masculine and feminine gang paraphernalia and ranging in age. Gabrielle Dennis, the Reef president, begins the orientation with a couple of announcements and introductions of the newest members. The announcements include a new “tele-bang” policy which allows Reefs to work from home two days a week and an extended parental-leave plan which gives new parents six months of paid leave. After announcements, Gabrielle instructs each new member to share their name, where they’re from, and why they decided to join the gang. The first to introduce themself is Jess from Houston (Issa Rae) who makes a joke about not knowing Beyonce despite being from the same city--to which everyone laughs, except Gabrielle--before sitting down. Gabrielle immediately stands up and yells, “hold up! I asked you to include a positive tid bit!” Before Jess has a chance to correct her mistake, Gabrielle scolds her for attempting to be a “comedian” and as a consequence assigns her to 3rd and Bonaporte, otherwise known as the chilliest corner to conduct gang business. The next person to introduce themselves is Shenedra (Robin Thede) who simply states her name and nothing else. After a moment of befuddlement, Gabrielle asks in frustration, “why you sitting there looking all blippity studpid? . . . I also asked for your goals.” Shenedra, who has maintained the same unbothered facial expression, eventually responds with her goals as “To bang.” Insulted by Shenedra’s lack of enthusiasm, Gabrielle begins stating reasons why Shenedra should have more humility: “You’ve been a Reef for what, five minutes and you already trying to stunt? You didn’t even finish your start paperwork, homie. What? You think you hard? Finish a 99 without looking at your driver’s license, nigga! That’s hard, nigga!” Still bothered by Shenedra’s unapologetic behavior, Gabrielle makes her wash the gang’s “delicates,” a consequence which makes Shenedra break her “hard” demeanor and regretfully exclaim,

"uuuggghhh! But that's nasty though!" The last new member (Quinta Brunson) doesn't get a chance to introduce herself and becomes the target of Gabrielle's intolerant frustration. After scolding Shenedra, Gabrielle yells "next" to which Quinta innocently laughs, "oh, is it my turn? Te-he-he-he-he." Right away, Gabrielle expresses her fury with Quinta and grabs a gun. Jess and Shenedra are mortified by the potential death presumed to take place, but are soon relieved when Gabrielle responds, "the only thing about to die is her career" before handing the gun to Quinta and making her leave the garage. The sketch concludes as a commercial for monster.com with a voice over describing the site as a place "where even mark-ass busters get hired. And we mean *hired*, hired."

Reimagining Gang Affiliation as a Professional Career: Gang Orientation is a sketch which demonstrates BUT in various ways. Firstly, the general concept of the sketch is Black utopian because gang affiliation is reimagined as a professional career. The Reefs are a gang of Black females who are professionally employed to gangbang. Their professionalism is indicated through their regulation practices which include orientation, employee benefits (tele-bang policy and paid parental leave), starter paperwork, 401Ks, and 1099 forms. These practices are indicative of government surveillance and employment, two characteristics which aren't currently associated with gang affiliation. Typically, gangs operate under low profile conditions to avoid attention from unwanted audiences, including and especially the government who have historically used the law to infiltrate and dismember gang communities. Within Gang Orientation, the Reefs not only complete government documents such as 401ks and 99 forms, but they are sponsored by monster.com, a national employment website. A purpose of BUT is to imagine current societal structures in future contexts (Eckel, 2016; Zamalin, 2019); and by

actualizing the Reef gang as an employment opportunity, aBLSS has illustrated BUT. In addition, the reimagining of gang life as a professional career is an example of how rhetorical imaginations invent future possibilities. By imagining the cultural context of gangs as a field of employment, a new job opportunity was invented within aBLSS' social context.

Black Freedom of Expression and Black Needs are Met in a Utopia: In addition to the overall concept of a Black female gang supported by larger society, Gang Orientation demonstrates BUT by creating a space in which Black people are free to express themselves while having their needs met. Another theme of BUT is imagining Black liberation, or the ability for Black people to receive societal benefits which they have been previously denied (Zamalin, 2019). Because gangs are currently denied government support, the Reef's employment status is Black utopian. This theme is further demonstrated through the acceptance of Black existence and experience. While each Reef member could be assumed to identify as a woman (the series is called "A Black *Lady* Sketch Show"), they don't. Their physical appearances range from masculine, to androgynous, to feminine and one of their policies uses language which intentionally diverges away from a cist-normative agenda as referenced in the sketch: they call paid maternity/paternity leave, "paid *parental* leave." This intentional decision demonstrates acknowledgement and acceptance of members who don't identify according to a male-female binary, which could also be understood as the Reef gang allowing its members to express themselves freely. In addition to gender fluidity, allowing members to present in masculine, androgynous, and feminine paraphernalia validates an aspect of Black womanhood which has previously been denied: divergence from white femininity.

Historically, Black women in the United States have been denied the social benefits of femininity because of their position during slavery as property. While enslaved, Black women

did not receive the courtesy and care extended to white women which later impacted their overall treatment in society post-emancipation: Black women's beauty wasn't recognized unless it resembled whiteness and Black women were expected to work because Black families were not paid enough to live under single incomes. These dynamics forced Black women to strive for unachievable standards of white femininity in order to be recognized as women. However, within Gang Orientation the Reefs are free to express themselves in ways which ignore the standards of white femininity completely. Being a Reef is not only a professional career, but a professional career which is dominated by men: gangbanging. So within this utopian setting, Black women are free to express their gender however they choose *and* they proudly work in a space traditionally dominated by men.

The last illustration of BUT is present in the Black cultural elements demonstrated in the sketch. Similar to Afrofuturism, BUT is rooted in Black experiences, so there's an expectation to see Black cultural elements within the imagined utopias. Gang Orientation contains many Black cultural elements illustrated in the communicative exchanges between Reef members. One example of such an exchange is the call and response practice the members use to validate a speaker: "Blippity" and "Scat, scat, scat." When reef president Gabrielle reminded the Reefs of the gang's intentional decision to make paid-parental leave a gender-inclusive term, she asked "Blippity?" to which the members replied "scat, scat, scat." This practice is one that Black people use internationally in various contexts to establish respect and recognition between a speaker and audience (Sale, 1992). By incorporating this practice in Gang Orientation, aBLSS demonstrates Black culture in an imagined space in which respect and recognition is a regular exchange.

In addition, BUT seeks to create spaces in which Blackness receives what it has previously been denied. Understanding that Black culture has not always been respected or recognized in the media, the use of call and response in a Black-dominated television series is also utopian. Another example of Black communication practiced in Gang Orientation is observable in the exchanges between Gabrielle and the new members. As each new member attempts to introduce themselves, they tend to lack focus and therefore fail to completely follow the introduction instructions: Jess nor Shenedra share their goals for becoming a Reef, and Quinta is caught not paying attention. When Gabrielle responds to the lack of adherence by the new members, she demonstrates communicative patterns which are familiar to Black experiences with authoritative figures. When Jess makes her joke about not knowing Beyoncé, Gabrielle accuses her of "being a comedian." To understand the reference to Black experiences, one has to analyze the comment and the *delivery* of the comment about being comical, which is an example of how experience precedes communication. Unless you've had an experience with a Black authoritarian who scolds you for attempting to be funny instead of following directions, you may not understand why Gabrielle's scolding is a comedic element of aBLSS and the Gang Orientation sketch. The same understanding is needed in other moments such as when Gabrielle is scolding Shenedra. Shenedra presents the role of someone pretending to be "hard" or unbothered by Gabrielle's authority.

In order to maintain control, Gabrielle challenges Shenedra through seemingly humiliating comments such as "you didn't even finish your starter paperwork" or "finish a 99 without looking at your driver's license." While the comments in particular may not connect to specific Black experiences, the exchange is familiar whereas a more experienced authoritarian is seeking to maintain control via humiliation. While the description of such an exchange may

seem abusive or degrading, within the context of the Reef utopia, this is an acceptable exchange--as indicated through the affirming head nods of other Reefs--and within aBLSS it is yet again a hilarious moment for those who can relate to the experience. By affirming these communicative patterns, Gang Orientation demonstrates the BUT theme of allowing Black experiences and existence to be normalized, which is an affirmation Blackness has historically been denied.

Courtroom Kiki

Although not the final *scene* of aBLSS, Courtroom Kiki is the last *sketch* of the series and depicts BUT elements which are only considered to be utopian in the context of our current racial society. The sketch begins as each character enters the scene and acknowledges the demographics of the room. First, the bailiff (Gabrielle Dennis) and court stenographer (Bresha Webb) enter and exchange a glance of pleasant surprise. The next person to enter is the defending lawyer (Quinta Brunson) who also exchanges a look of pleasant surprise and says, "Black girl magic for real." Yvette Nicole Brown, the judge, enters third and greets everyone by saying, "Well, good morning. God is good?" to which Quinta responds, "all the time." The final characters to arrive on scene are the prosecuting lawyer (Robin Thede) and her client (Issa Rae). After apologizing for their tardiness, Robin takes a look around the room and asks, "what in the baby hairs?" Quinta then takes the opportunity to officially state, "It's a Black lady courtroom" so the women begin singing and clapping, "Black lady courtroom." Issa appears to be the only one disturbed by the singing until the judge holds up her hand to regain silence. The women seem embarrassed and remorseful until the judge says, "I have been in this courtroom for over 20 years and have never seen melanin this popping! Cicely Tyson would be proud." As the court hearing proceeds, each of the women, except Issa, continues to express their excitement about

the demographic make-up of the session. The expressions include a group selfie, comments about Black-Greek-letter affiliation and where the women went to law school, puns such as when Quinta called Robin her "sister in *law*" and many other idiomatic moments. The hearing concludes when Judge Yvette says "The defense photos are deemed inadmissible, and I hereby deem this courtroom ready to kiki. Black lady courtroom." Once Issa understands that she won the trial, she joins the other women in chanting "Black lady courtroom" and dancing. While the women are chanting, a Black male Bailiff enters and interrupts by yelling, "ladies!" Initially the women are taking back, but then the bailiff asks for carmax, which isn't offered in the "white man's courtroom." Bresha happily obliged his request by removing a carmax tube from her bra and proceeds to chant: "Black lady courtroom."

Utopian Elements are Utopian Only within Our Current Racialized Societal Context:

Courtroom Kiki is one of the most direct forms of BUT whereas its utopian elements exist only because of our current society's racialized social context. Within the sketch, a black utopia is created simply because everyone in the courtroom is a Black woman. From the greetings to the courtroom comments, to the direct chanting of "Black lady courtroom," Courtroom Kiki is solely centered around the idea of Black women occupying a space that rarely, if ever, is completely filled with Black women. Historically within the United States, Black people have been failed by legal systems because of the inability to participate or the intentional perpetuation of their misrepresentation within courtrooms. After the failed Reconstruction Era, Black code laws prevented Black people from holding positions of power which included political offices, becoming judges and jurors, and representing themselves in court. As a result of those laws, the justice system became a place to practice injustice against Black communities. Even after the

civil rights movement, which consisted of countless court hearings and law amendments to reform the justice system and institute equality, Black bodies became targets of legal misrepresentation and mass incarceration, ultimately resulting in our current racialized society. By depicting a courtroom in which everyone, no matter their role, is a Black woman celebrating Black womanhood, Courtroom Kiki illustrates its ability to represent a Black utopia and thus demonstrates BUT.

Black Freedom of Expression in a Utopia: The second and final BUT theme present in Courtroom Kiki is Black freedom of expression. As previously stated, BUT seeks to grant Blackness what it has historically been denied. Within Courtroom Kiki, this theme is illustrated through the expression of Blackness without repercussion. When the women first enter the scene, each of them communicates acknowledgement of the Black woman demographic present in the room. First, there is the nonverbal greeting between Gabrielle and Bresha via eyes connecting and an affirming head nod. Second is Quinta's comment, "Black girl magic for real." Third is Yvette's call and response greeting "Well good morning. God is good?" "All the time." And last is Robin's expression of pleasant surprise, "What in the baby hairs?" The greetings are then summarized and affirmed by Quinta's direct statement, "It's a Black lady courtroom." The immediate acknowledgement of this rare utopia by the women are among the first illustrations of Black expression. These comments wouldn't normally hold value or be accepted in a professional setting among non-Black populations because there isn't a shared experience of misrepresentation or underrepresentation of culture. But because this is an all-Black setting, the women are free to make these comments without the threat of being misunderstood or reprimanded. Even Issa's critique of the singing--"yea y'all shouldn't be singing"--isn't necessarily rooted in misunderstanding the utopian moment, but rather her position as someone

who wishes to receive compensation for her services--Issa is the prosecutor in the court case. Issa's position is clarified at the conclusion of the sketch when she realizes she won the case and precedes to join the women in singing "Black lady courtroom." The value of shared understanding and validation is further indicated when the Black male bailiff enters the room and yells for the women's attention. The women who initially seem offended by the disturbance are soon reassured when they learn that the bailiff's disruption was only to ask for a resource (CarMax) that he couldn't receive from "the white man's courtroom." Another way in which freedom of Black expression is demonstrated in the sketch, appears throughout the hearing. In one scene, Judge Yvette calls the lawyers, bailiff, and stenographer to the bench for a sidebar which turns into a rapport discussion about the women's legal backgrounds, Black Greek affiliation, and a selfie. By using her power to grant such an exchange, Judge Yvette is directly creating a space for each Black woman to freely express herself outside of the criticism Issa was displaying. The incorporation of such moments reiterates the courtroom space as a Black utopia where Black women are free to express themselves, thus demonstrating Courtroom Kiki's ability to represent BUT.

Chapter Four: Discussion

This study explores the way the rhetorical imagination manifests the canon of invention through an analysis of Afrofuturism and Black Utopian Thought within *A Black Lady Sketch Show* as an avenue for Black liberation. Three sketches from aBLSS were selected for analysis: The Invisible Spy, Gang Orientation, and Courtroom Kiki. The Invisible Spy sketch utilizes Afrofuturism to reimagine social marginalization, Gang Orientation explores BUT in the context of employment standards, and Courtroom Kiki illustrates a Black utopia which emphasizes the current cultural context of our society. This discussion explains the significance of these themes within rhetorical studies and emphasizes their ability to function as avenues for Black liberation.

Within the Invisible Spy sketch, social marginalization is coded as "invisibility" and reflects not just the physical *appearance*, but physical *experience* of Trinity as a Black woman. By understanding that invisibility characterizes her experiences—Trinity isn't *physically* invisible, she's *socially* invisible—the audience becomes part of the collective group dream imagined (Gunn, 2003) by the creators of the show. This in turn allows us to validate and understand the experiences of *this* Black woman's marginality in a more abstract way. Within Afrofuturism, codes or "trickster technology" (Lavender, 2016) are hidden strategies for gaining opportunity: trickster technology and coding messages are imaginative inventions that result from cultural experience or circumstances. No one directly told Black people that they would need to use codes or trickster technology as an avenue for gaining freedom or access to human rights, however centuries of cultural degradation taught Blackness that it wasn't meant to exist or survive in this white supremacist society, so Blackness imagined ways to circumvent the regulations of its reality. Trickster technology and codes, are thus inventions of collective Black

imagination, or according to Bormann (Gunn, 2003) "character themes which focus on absent or mythical agents…and setting themes that concern the place of action." The significance of understanding trickster technology is that when beginning to imagine a lifestyle outside the laws and expectations of white supremacy, Blackness must be creative. It must *invent* ways to express itself beyond what it has been given. In the Invisible Spy sketch, social marginality is the experience Blackness didn't choose to endure, but by coding social marginalization as "invisibility," Thede and other aBLSS creators were able to invent a space where Blackness could exist differently—as a secret strength for evading dangers that even non-Blackness can't evade: a CIA mission. But Afrofuturism isn't just about being creative, it's about the creativity of *Blackness* in particular because of how the Black imagination was able to invent avenues to perpetuate the existence of Blackness.

Enslaved Africans had *everything* stripped from them when they reached the new world, and a Eurocentric culture was beat into them and reiterated during centuries of bondage. The ability for a culture to survive outside of the one being forced and reinforced, required some level of imagination. Within this context, the imagination becomes rhetorical because engaging the imagination is no longer simply defined by dreams but works to invent that which doesn't or isn't meant to exist. Imagining freedom to eventually participate in society, imagining returning home, imagining a new world, imagining something for the next generation to hold on to. Enslavement was the experience that called forth the group dream of Black imagination and hope, or the belief that Blackness would ever exist beyond inferiority. The significance of Afrofuturism being rooted in Black experience comes from the need for Blackness to persevere. And because of how abstract science fiction is, it serves as a space in which Blackness can persevere abstractly, ultimately becoming whatever it chooses.

The Invisible Spy sketch can thus be viewed as a pocket universe (Lavender, 2019) or an invented space in which the Black imagination was expressed. The use of a Black woman with natural hair and a curvy body as a main character capable of completing missions is a demonstration of Blackness in a pocket universe. The use of Double Dutch and the Electric slide as life-saving knowledge when Trinity needed to evade the lasers is an example of Blackness in a pocket universe. Even the validation of Blackness as only being comparable to another form of Black existence is Blackness in a pocket universe. Pocket universes are forms of Black liberation because they create space for Blackness to exist in ways it previously hasn't which is the purpose of Black liberation.

Within Gang Orientation, we observe a different form of Black experience via employment opportunities. The Reef gang members consist of Black people who desire to live a gang-affiliated lifestyle. Usually such a lifestyle consists of secrecy and a lack of support from governmental structures—the relationship between Black gangs and the American government is typically in opposition—however, within Gang Orientation this relationship is casually reimagined in a way that allows Black gang and cultural experiences to be emphasized. A history of violence and alienation (hyperreal violence loop) built an infrastructure in which racism and discrimination were foundational, and is again the reason why Blackness collectively dreams. In attempt to disrupt the hyperreal violence loop, Black Utopian Thought seeks to reimagine aspects of societal infrastructures to create space for Blackness to flourish (Zamalin, 2019). As the reimagining of these circumstances manifest, the canon of invention is demonstrated in *what* is produced. Within Gang Orientation, the reimagined infrastructure is the job market or that which constitutes employment: gang affiliation is depicted as a professional career.

Courtroom Kiki concludes aBLSS with a Black utopia in which the experiences of Blackness are directly celebrated. As a sketch about a court hearing where Black women occupy every position in the courtroom is very unusual within American society, so this utopia allows us to a probable, imagined experience of Blackness. The likelihood of a "regular-looking" Black woman becoming a legend within the CIA for being herself is imaginative yet unlikely. And the likelihood of gangbanging becoming a professional career supported by the government is also imaginative, yet unlikely. However, the likelihood of a court hearing consisting of all Black women is imaginative *and* likely. The significance of Courtroom Kiki is its depiction of what has become possible over time within the US: Black women completely occupying a space of justice. Historically, Blackness was oppressed and suppressed with the intent to eliminate it (slavery, failed reconstruction, Jim Crow, KKK, etc.), so the idea of Blackness controlling anything, especially a courtroom—where fates are determined and many *Black* fates have been unjustly served—is inventive, and also inspired. Since the conception of race, Blackness has been stamped with a seal of negativity via the hyperreal violence loop, so by imagining and inventing a space in which Blackness is accepted and validated in positions of power, it is liberated from its position of inferiority and inherent alienation.

Noteworthy, aBLSS serves as *an* avenue or *an* example of how Black liberation manifests through Afrofuturist and Black utopian creativity. The term Blackness is used here to refer to experiences and existence of Black people within the cultural context of race, meaning it does not characterize all Black *people*, but rather creates a space to discuss Blackness as a racial identity within the United States. When identifying how aBLSS demonstrated Black liberation, this study identified aspects of liberation but with the understanding that not all Black people feel invisible in our society, and clearly not all Black people wish to affiliate with gang life or desire

to be part of a courtroom hearing; however, Blackness within the context of those experiences has been validated, accepted, and thus liberated within aBLSS.

Chapter Five

Conclusion

The purpose of this thesis was to expand rhetorical theory surrounding the imagination and canon of invention by revealing ways in which *A Black Lady Sketch Show* (2019) demonstrates Afrofuturism and Black Utopian Thought as a means for Black liberation. Research about the rhetorical imagination suggests that sometimes groups engage in collective dreaming to endure their current reality and through that dreaming also engage in invention of shared fantasies and perspectives (Gunn, 2016). This thesis identified Afrofuturism and Black Utopian Thought as cultural technologies capable of demonstrating such imaginative rhetorical invention.

Afrofuturism was defined according to scholar Isaiah Lavender III who identifies it as a spiritual technology capable of producing knowledge that emphasizes the relationship between the physical and non-physical world (2016) and Ytasha Womack whose definition includes intersectional characteristics of the imagination, technology, future, and liberation (2013). By emphasizing the intersectional creativity of the imagination and metaphysical and physical worlds, Afrofuturism reveals ways of existing that go beyond the current limitations of our society ultimately creating endless possibilities including avenues for freedom. Black Utopian Thought was articulated as imaginative thinking aimed toward creating opportunities that were

either previously denied or didn't exist (Zamalin, 2019). BUT is more specifically applicable to societal institutions such as the government or education systems.

Within aBLSS, Afrofuturism was identified within the "Invisible Spy" sketch where social marginalization was reimagined as a special skill necessary to accomplish top CIA missions. And BUT was identified in both the "Gang Orientation" and "Courtroom Kiki" sketches which illustrated utopias where Blackness was reimagined and reinvented in ways that have historically been impossible: gangbanging was reimagined as a professional career and a courtroom hearing consisted entirely of Black women in every position. By illustrating ways to reimagine and reinvent the existence and experiences of Blackness, aBLSS demonstrates its ability to be Afrofuturist and Black Utopian, and thus an avenue for Black liberation.

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Vita

Natalie Weathers is from Chicago, Illinois. She received her B.A. in Communication Studies from Iowa State University in May 2018. She received her M.A. from Syracuse University in May 2021.