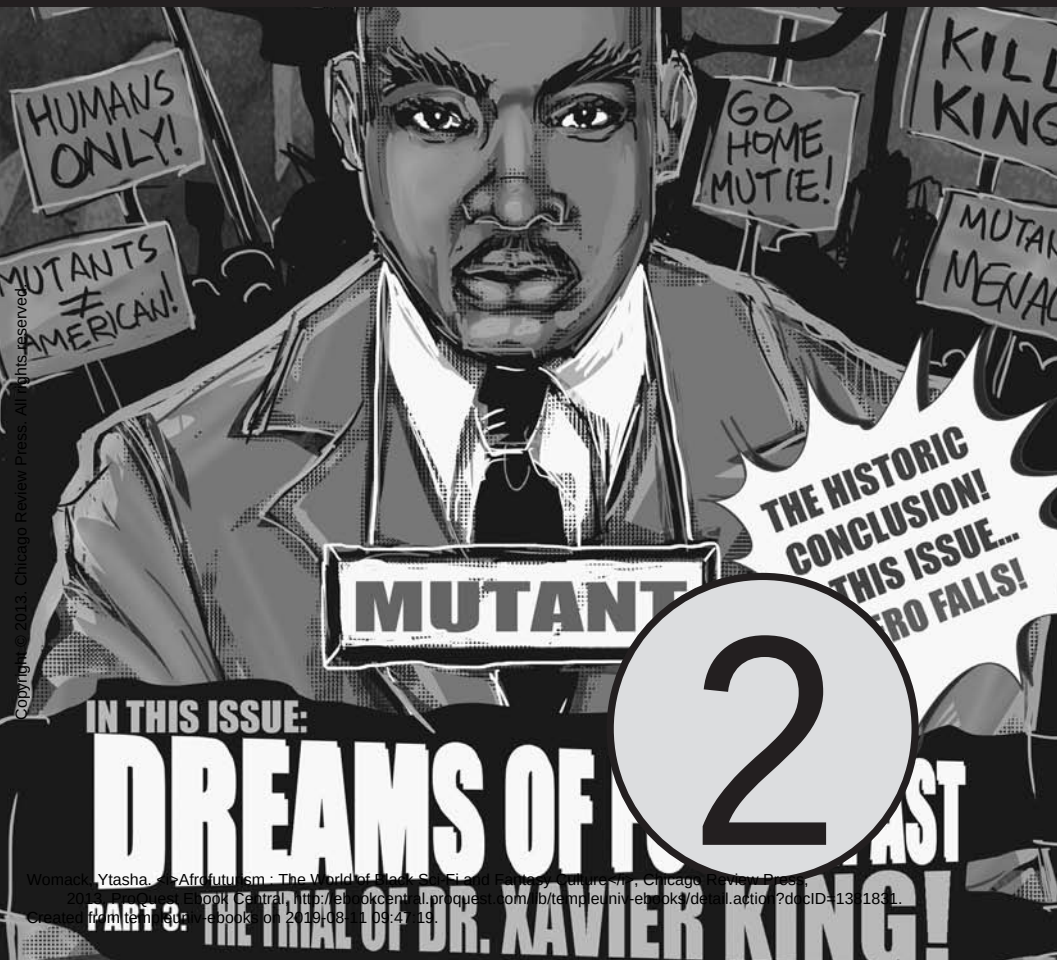
BLACK KIRBY PRESENTS

THE UNCANNY KING'S MEN

A HUMAN FAIRY TALE NAMED BLACK



When I was in college, I remember my African American History teacher posing a question that would forever change our lives. "Which came first," she asked, "racism or slavery?" My classmates, all of whom considered themselves to be quasi black history experts, were firm in their answer: racism. We believed that those who led the transatlantic slave trade and infused laws to support it had an intrinsic belief that people of darker skin were inferior and thus they enslaved them. But we were wrong. Slavery, she said, came first, and racism was created to justify it. We argued with her, because for us, it simply didn't make any sense. Race, we believed, always existed. But race, we soon realized, despite our pride, was a creation too.

Soon after I wrote *Post Black*, race as a political creation that we'd all come to live with as this fixed division became so obvious that I began including it in my book chats as part of my official stump speech. When I met artist and filmmaker Cauleen Smith in July 2011, she best summed up race as creation: "Blackness is a technology," said Smith. "It's not real. It's a thing."

Dorothy Roberts, Northwestern University professor and medical-ethics advocate, calls race "the fatal invention." She writes extensively about medical and health experts falsely using race and DNA to make medical determinations.

"I decided to write [the book *Fatal Invention*] because I have noticed resurgence in the use of the term race as a biological category. And also [I noticed] a growing acceptance among colleagues and speakers that race really is biological and somehow genomic science will soon discover the biological truths about race," says Roberts. "The more I looked into it, I saw there were more scientists that said they discovered race in the genes, and more products coming out showing that race is a natural division."[1]

Race as a biological entity has seeped into conventional wisdom with both blacks and whites at various times, using the invention to explain power imbalances and superiority. Even Nation of Islam founder Elijah Muhammad taught that the white race was invented by an evil scientist. Others, in an attempt to counter racism, developed an odd science claiming that melanin gave brown people better intuitive or superhuman abilities.

Frankly, as much as people analyze race in the public discourse, it's rarely discussed as an invention to regulate social order. Even those who advocate against injustice rarely broach race as a creation. The argument could have the same consequences as that of post-racialists, who say that racial divisions no longer exist. How does one discuss the realities of the pain and social maladies caused by lack of equity and at the same time say that race is a creation? Are the injustices imagined too? When Roberts was a guest, and I a guest cohost, on WVON's *Matt McGill Morning Show* in Chicago, one angered caller asked, "Well, if race is an invention and not real, how do you explain racism?" Roberts shared that the politics and social measures as well as the laws and injustices around race are real. However, race is not some default biological category, although it is a social and political identity.

The whole contemplation ripped the lid off a Pandora's box of questions for me. What decisions do we make because of the limitations or expectations we associate with race? If we cast off those limitations, how would our social lives change? Would we have the same friendships? Live in the same neighborhoods? Go to the same schools? I'd pose these questions to audiences, and it was a daunting thought. Outer obstacles aside, what role have we played in limiting our own lives based on race? This

contemplation ultimately led to the *Rayla 2212* series. I wanted to write about a world of people of color where race as we know it today was not a factor. But I also wanted the challenge of writing about people of color without using today's ethnic cultures as an identity or backdrop while still denoting the value of the cultures in their past and our present. It was a very Afrofuturistic experiment. For that, I had to take my story to space.

The Birth of the Post-Human

In the fall of 2011, I received a call from Hank Pellissier, then a fellow with the Institute for Ethics and Emerging Technologies. Pellissier was looking for futurists to submit essays. The institute is also a proponent of transhumanism, a futurist philosophy that explores the possibilities of a post-human life. Being human, as we understand it today, could evolve with new technologies. Could science extend our life span by three hundred years? Could new medicine curtail the need for sleep? Transhumanists believe in maximizing human potential and look to exceed human limitations, physical and otherwise, with new medicine, nanotechnology, or robotic culture. Some transhumanists boldly claim that by 2045, humans will officially merge with machines. Ironic, I thought, because that same decade is predicted to mark the beginning of the majority-minority America.

Nevertheless, transhumanism is a fascinating concept. One day being plain old human could be old school. Physicalities like childbirth (which is already being revolutionized), eating, or death could be tokens of the distant past. But in stretching my imagination to grasp the prospects of post-human life, I found myself thinking about what it means to be human.

We don't give a great deal of thought to being human, although history is marred with theories about and battles over human rights. While some politics and rights are debated, there are some agreed-upon human rights that supersede nationality, politics, and expectations—human rights that are deemed inalienable. Life, liberty, and the security of person are among those espoused in the UN's Universal Declaration of Human Rights, as well as the belief that we're all "born free."

At least this is the general consensus today.

But at one point in history, just as monarchies challenged Galileo on his Earth-revolving-around-the-sun theory, scientists and profiteers argued about just who was human and who was not. A color-based, sex-based hierarchy was formed largely to regulate who had access to the world's resources and rights of self-determination and who did not.

The concept is a weird one. One of the most difficult ideas for descendants of enslaved Africans to swallow is that at one point in time, our ancestors were not deemed human. This wasn't just an opinion, but rather a legal status encoded in the first version of the US Constitution. By law, enslaved Africans were three-fifths human. None of the rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness that we so proudly celebrate today were extended to women, Native Americans, or anyone who was not a white male. Citizenship rights were only granted to those who were legally human.

"Black people in America came here as chattel, so we've had to constantly prove our humanity," says San Francisco poet and Afro-surrealist D. Scot Miller. "I'm not a shovel, I'm not a horse, I'm a full-blown human being. It's absurd."

In Steven Spielberg's film *Lincoln*, there's a pivotal scene in which radical Republican and antislavery advocate Thaddeus Stephens is drilled by his fellow Congressmen on whether blacks and whites are equal under God or just equal under the law. To convince pro-slavery lawmakers to pass the Thirteenth Amendment abolishing slavery, Stephens had to go against his own code of ethics and emphasize that the soon-to-be-freed slaves should be equal under the law and no more. Watching this dramatic negotiation of human status by lawmakers was heart-wrenching.

Now, the Constitution prior to the Thirteenth Amendment didn't decree that blacks were aliens, or at least it didn't use those words. Those who profited from westward expansion didn't quite say that people of African descent were rocketed from a distant star, either. However, those invested in this new color-based power imbalance did push literature and fake science deeming people of African descent and browner peoples in general as hovering on the lower end of the Darwinian scale. No, they didn't hail from a planet in another solar system, but they were from another world, with mysterious lands and customs that were devalued and vilified to dehumanize.

This dehumanization was wrongfully encoded in laws, violently enforced, perpetuated by propaganda and stereotypes, and falsely substantiated by inaccurate science, all to justify a swath of violent atrocities in the name of greed. Humans have used these methods to dehumanize others. The transatlantic slave trade, Jim Crow in the American South, South African apartheid, the Holocaust in Europe, ethnic cleansing in the former Yugoslavia and in Rwanda, and the massacre of native peoples throughout the world were waged on the basis of others being nonhuman.

What Does It Mean to Be Human?

British writer Mark Sinker was arguably the first to ask, "What does it mean to be human?" in what would later be called the Afrofuturistic context. Sinker, then a writer for *Wired*, posed the question and explored the aspirations, sci-fi themes, and technology in jazz, funk, and hip-hop music.

"In other words, Mark made the correlation between *Blade Runner* and slavery, between the idea of alien abduction and the real events of slavery," writes Kodwo Eshun. "It was an amazing thing, because as soon as I read this, I thought, my God, it just allows so many things."[2]

Dery identified the parallels in "Black to the Future" as well. "African Americans are, in a very real sense, the descendants of alien abductees," Dery writes. He compares the atrocities of racism experienced by blacks in the United States to "a sci-fi nightmare in which unseen but no less impassable force fields of intolerance frustrate their movement; 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)."[3]

Dery and Sinker were not the first to explore the deplorable need of some to dehumanize others in the quest for power. Yet their frameworks led to Afrofuturistic writings that for the first time linked the transatlantic slave trade to a metaphor of alien abduction.

What does it mean to be nonhuman? As a nonhuman, your life is not valued. You are an "alien," "foreign," "exotic," "savage"—a wild one to be conquered or a nuisance to be destroyed. Your bodies are not your own, fit for probing and research. You have no history of value. You are incapable of creating culture in general,

but when you do, it is from an impulse or emotion, never intellect. Humans, well meaning or otherwise, can't relate to a nonhuman.

Even the term "illegal alien," often used for undocumented workers moving to nations across the world, plays off fears of otherness, invasion, and takeover. The fear fanned by the fast-approaching minority-majority nation shift in the United States has led to hotly debated laws and policies that mostly target Latino immigrants. Advocates charge that racial profiling and other human-rights violations are on the upswing as undocumented workers and those who fit the ethnic description of the stereotyped "illegal alien" fall prey to unjust attacks, violence, or surveillance.

The greater part of the civil rights movement in the United States, as well as self-rule movements in precolonial India, the Caribbean, and on the African continent, were efforts to ensure equal rights for all. And this struggle paralleled equal efforts to prove that people of color, women, LGBTQ people, the working class, and others were in fact human.

The burden of having to prove one's humanity has defined the attainment of some of the greatest human rights achievements of our times as well as some of the greatest artistic works.

However, this notion of otherness prevails.

The Other Side of the Rainbow

The alien metaphor is one of the most common tropes in science fiction. Whether they are invading, as in *Independence Day*; the ultimate enemy, as portrayed in *Alien*; or misunderstood, like in *E.T.*, there is a societal lesson of conquering or tolerance that reminds viewers of real-life human divisions.

Other films are more explicit in the racial metaphor. *District 9*, a film set in South Africa about segregated alien settlements, was inspired by the horrors of Cape Town's District Six during the apartheid era. *Avatar* is a thinly veiled commentary on imperialism and indigenous cultures. And *The Brother from Another Planet* depicts an extraterrestrial in the form of a black man confused by the racial norms of the day.

Much of the science fiction fascination with earthbound alien encounters is preoccupied with how both cultures could merge and the turmoil that would ensue from overcoming perceptions of difference.

But other artists have compared their wrestling with W. E. B. Du Bois's double consciousness or the struggle of being both American and black with alien motifs. Artists from Sun Ra to Lil Wayne have referenced being alien to explain isolation.

Author Saidiya Hartman wrote in her book *Lose Your Mother* about feeling trapped in a racial paradox: "Was it why I sometimes felt as weary of America as if I too had landed in what was now South Carolina in 1526 or in Jamestown in 1619? Was it the tug of all the lost mothers and orphaned children? Or was it that each generation felt anew the yoke of a damaged life and the distress of being a native stranger, an eternal alien?"[4]

Theorists and the Double Alien

"I think that using alien to describe otherness works," says Reynaldo Anderson, a professor who writes about Afrofuturism. Anderson is one of many theorists who view the alien metaphor as one that explains the looming space of otherness perpetuated by the idea of race. "We're among the first alien abductees,

kidnapped by strange people who take us over by ships and conduct scientific experiments on us. They bred us. They came up with a taxonomy of the people they bred: mulatto, octoroon, quadroon."

He adds that the scientific experimentations conducted in the name of race mimic sci-fi horror flicks. Henrietta Lacks was a 1950s Virginia tobacco farmer whose cells were taken without her permission and used to create immortal cell lines sold for research around the world. Named HeLa, these cell lines lived past Lacks's own death and were essential to the development of the polio vaccine, cloning, gene mapping, and in vitro fertilization. They were even sent in the first space missions to see what would happen to cells in zero gravity.

The alien concept has been expanded to explain isolation as well, with studies of "the black geek" in literature and an array of self-created modalities that infer a discomfort in one's own skin. In summer 2012, Emory University's African-American Studies Collective issued a call for papers for their 2013 conference, titled "Alien Bodies: Race, Space, and Sex in the African Diaspora." Held February 8 and 9, 2013, the conference examined the alien-as-race idea and looked at transformative tools to empower those who are alienated. It explored how "we begin to understand the ways in which race, space and sex configure 'the alien' within spaces allegedly 'beyond' markers of difference" and asked, "What are some ways in which the 'alien from within as well as without' can be overcome, and how do we make them sustainable?"

Afrofuturist academics are looking at alien motifs as a progressive framework to examine how those who are alienated adopt modes of resistance and transformation.

Stranger Than Science Fiction

Truth is stranger than fiction, but is truth stranger than science fiction too? Talk about real-time: science fiction has introduced a flash of technologies that our world is catching up to—the Internet, commercial space flights, smartphones, and the discovery of the Higgs boson, or "God Particle"—to name a few. In some ways we've surpassed the sci-fi canon.

Afrofuturism is concerned with both the impact of these technologies on social conditions and with the power of such technologies to end the "-isms" for good and safeguard humanity. Historically, new technologies have emerged with a double-edged sword, deepening as many divides as they build social bridges. Gunpowder was a technology that empowered colonizers and gave them the undeniable edge in creating color-based caste systems. Early forays into genetics were created to link ethnic physical traits with intelligence, thus falsely justifying dehumanization, slavery, and holocausts across the globe.

The Tuskegee experiment, in which innocent black men were injected with syphilis for scientific study, or the use of the immortal cells of Henrietta Lacks are evidence of how profit and the race to discovery must be tempered with strong ethics. "HeLa cells were the first human biological materials ever bought and sold, which helped launch a multibillion-dollar industry," says Rebecca Skloot, author of a book on Lack's immortal cells. "When [Lack's family] found out that people were selling vials of their mother's cells, and that the family didn't get any of the resulting money, they got very angry."[4]

Dorothy Roberts writes about how race is inappropriately used in medical research and to market products. "There are studies

to explain racial divisions in health that are actually caused by social inequalities," Roberts said in her interview with me for my blog *The Post Black Experience* (http://postblackexperience.com). She continued, "Yet you have researchers studying high blood pressure, asthma among blacks, etc., and looking for a genetic cause. However, research shows these [illnesses] are the effects of racial inequality and the stress of racial inequality."[5] Although ethics and emerging technologies is a discussion that all futurists are concerned with, Afrofuturists, in particular, are highly sensitive to how or if such technologies will deepen or transcend the imbalances of race.

Son of Saturn

The alien motif reveals dissonance while also providing a prism through which to view the power of the imagination, aspiration, and creativity channeled in resisting dehumanization efforts. "The most important thing about Afrofuturism is to know that there have always been alternatives in what has been given in the present," says Alexander Weheliye. "I am not making light of the history of enslavement and medical experimentation," he continues, "but black people have always developed alternate ways of existing outside of these oppressions."

Improvisation, adaptability, and imagination are the core components of this resistance and are evident both in the arts and black cultures at large. Jazz, hip-hop, and blues are artistic examples, but there are ways of life that are based on improvisation, too, that aren't fully understood. "Of all the thousands of tribes on the continent, what they all share is this respect for improvisation," says Smith. "That idea in and of itself is a form

of technology. In the Western world, improvisation is a failure; you do it when something goes wrong. But when black people improvise it's a form of mastery."

In Reynaldo Anderson's essay "Cultural Studies or Critical Afrofuturism: A Case Study in Visual Rhetoric, Sequential Art, and Post-Apocalyptic Black Identity," he talks about the notion of twinness as a form of resistance that pulled on Africanisms but also was uniquely formulated for survival. This survival took place in postapocalyptic times, with the transatlantic slave trade being the apocalypse, he says. Noting that African slaves came from societies in which women and men had equal governing power, Anderson says that "to be a human being an individual should possess both masculine and feminine principles (protector-nurturer) in order to have a healthy community." This twinness, he adds, was a survival mechanism "that enabled [women] to psychologically shield themselves and their inner lives." However, he also says that rhetorical strategies include signifying, call-and-response, narrative sequencing, tonal semantics, technological rhetoric, agitation, nationalism, jeremiads, nommo, Africana womanist or black feminist epistemologies, queer studies, time and space, visual rhetoric, and culture as modes of resistance.[6] But the point of this alien and postapocalyptic metaphor, says Anderson, isn't to get lost in traumas of the past or present-day alienation. The alien framework is a framework for understanding and healing.

It's the reason that D. Denenge Akpem teaches an Afrofuturism class as a pathway to liberation. "The basic premise of this course is that the creative ability to manifest action and transformation has been essential to the survival of Blacks in the Diaspora," she says.

The liberation edict in Afrofuturism provides a prism for evolution.