Visions of the future abound, celebrating progress, speed, and the empowering presence of technology in our lives, often accompanied by pronouncements about a brave new world coming into being—a world free from race, class, and gender conflicts. But how utopian are visions of new gizmos and gadgets fueled by commercial imperatives? And to whom do these futures belong?

They say you can’t see race in cyberspace, but it is certainly not a coincidence that post-identity sentiments thrive in a climate intolerant to appeals for social and racial justice. Cyber-libertarian ideology holds that assertions of race, class, or gender difference in technologically enabled environments are like broaching politics at a dinner party—the epitome of bad taste. As a result, a false opposition is created, placing women and people of color on one side of the utopian equation, and technoculture on the other.

This split is partly a function of the “digital divide”—a gap that, not surprisingly, falls along race and class lines. Even in the midst of a digital revolution, the social conditions produced by the new information order have much in common with those that shaped the old industrial order. So the digital divide has become a call-to-arms for many African Americans, activists and entrepreneurs alike. But while it speaks to very material concerns that require real solutions, the digital divide is also ideological. This gap has become a self-fulfilling prophecy, reinforcing stereotypes of black technophobia; it confirms that African Americans can’t keep pace in a hi-tech world that threatens to outstrip them. Focusing on the digital divide has paralyzed the thinking even of those who seek to bridge it.

Why don’t we look at the innovations in technique and communication that can be found throughout black diasporic culture? Technology speaks to identity, but identity also
sound, and image in the service of reimagining black life. They create reflections on the African diasporic past and renderings of our possible futures. These are past-future visions, and in this sense, AfroFuturism is an antidote to unbridled, raceless future-lust.

Envisioning the Future

Cultural production can produce social reflection. Art that attends to themes of science and technology offers particularly sharp models of social reflection, for it is in the realm of art—with its ability to bring heightened perception and a critical distance to bear on lived experience—that we are better able to consider how technology is significant in everyday life. And AfroFuturist narratives in which time collapses into a single plane are not necessarily unconcerned with history.

The work of digital artist Fatimah Tuggar might best be characterized as “cyborg realism”: a body of work that is equally true to the traditions of the Nigerian communities that she photographs and to shifting social relations in an increasingly technological world. Tuggar’s unlikely cyborgs are most often rural African women engaged in domestic activities.

“Focusing on the digital divide has paralyzed the thinking even of those who seek to bridge it.”

Tuggar’s method tricks the eye. At first glance, her digitally modified and U.V. laminated images seem to depict familiar visions of Africa: Nigerian women in traditional dress and rural villages bereft of modern influence and modern comforts. These images are seductive, drawing the viewer’s eye with rich hues and tones. They are also deceptive. Tuggar’s images seem to provide confirmation of the “real Africa” we already know, that place where technology has never existed, that dark continent that is the opposite of the West.

But, in fact, the surreal settings she composes exist in “no place.” For these are images of a virtual Africa—virtual because they are digitally built environments and because, in their juxtaposition of hi-tech artifacts with rural African life, they depict scenarios that are unimaginable, and therefore unreal, to many Western eyes. The result is a body of utopian, and sometimes dystopian, reflections on Africa and modernity.

Tuggar also deals with domestic and information technologies that are coded as feminine. Her collaged images bring into relief the contradictions and the ambiguities of post-modern progress.
simultaneously exploring the important role that non-Western women play in the free trade zone assembly lines, or rural data processing outposts, and their desire for modern convenience. Her method allows her to consider, side-by-side, the contradiction between the sometimes tragic history of modernity and colonialism in Nigeria, and the power that digital technologies offer to better connect Africa to the global flow of goods, services, and information.

In this sense, her work responds to what she keenly terms "soft power," the flow of electronics and information that enables neo-colonial power, despite the absence of physical proximity. Tuggar believes that soft power must be battled with soft power. She exercises her own by creating images of African women at ease with technology in the public and private sphere, women who own and desire technological gadgets and the power that they can wield. Her representations are not blanket indictments of technological advance, but rather an opportunity for the viewer to consider the incongruities and contradictions of uneven development. They examine soft power as both a tool of domination and a tool of possibility.

With her digital photomontage, Tuggar provides alternative, critical icons for the digital revolution that look neither like the hyper-aestheticized cyborg women of television, film, or photography nor like the white male "pirates of Silicon Valley." Her unlikely cyborgs, rather than indulging in the glamour of the posthuman, offer images and reflections on the effect of technology upon women's everyday lives. Tuggar's images revisit the past, redefine the probable, and forecast the possible.

Alien Nation

The central focus of AfroFuturist thought is in defining the relationships between race and technology through the many places where they intersect, including fiction and digital art. But there is no consensus among critics about the absolute significance of these associations. Like the cultural productions they write about, the strength of what we might cautiously call AfroFuturist criticism lies in the speculative and fragmented nature of the ideas.

Mark Dery coined the word "AfroFuturism" in a 1993 essay, first published in South Atlantic Quarterly, called "Black to the Future." Dery argued that "African American voices have other stories to tell about culture, technology, and things to come." He continued, "If there is an AfroFuturism, it must be sought in unlikely places, constellated from far-flung points."

Surveying black cultural production in film, music, literature, genre fiction, comics, and the arts, Dery assembled these "other stories," models of subjectivity which resonated with African American history due to their uncanny parallels with the geographic dislocations and abuses of chattel slavery. In an oft-quoted passage, Dery wrote, "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 [syphilis] experiment and tasers come readily to mind)."

“AfroFuturist narratives insist that who we’ve been and where we’ve traveled is always an integral component of who we can become.”

Was there ever anyone more "alien" than the black men and women abducted from Africa and brought to the New World against their will? Wasn’t the history of black Americans a "sci-fi nightmare" in which the tools of the future were continually turned against black people? In posing these questions, Dery brilliantly elucidated recurring themes in black culture that crossed genres and forged paths for further inquiry.

But he leaves the full depth of Afrodiasporic technoculture underexplored. We are presented with an abject people with escapist visions. By virtue of their historically subjugated relationship to technology, blacks are given more of a reactionary than a constitutive relationship to technoculture in Dery’s account. The affiliation he established between AfroFuturist artists is limited to their shared racial background rather than to the improvisation and innovation of black diasporic culture. These artists are notable more because they appropriate images of technology than because of the use of
technologies in their work. By focusing on themes rather than techniques, Dery underappreciates the history of black technological innovation.

Free at Last—Of History?

Much of that innovation has occurred in music production, so it’s not surprising that another strain of AfroFuturist thought has developed in music writing and criticism. In hip-hop, the separation and machination of break beats, achieved with turntables and sampling technology, become the building blocks for new combinations of sound. For cultural critic Tricia Rose, author of Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America, these technological innovations express the Afro-diasporic “cultural priorities” of rhythmic layering and rupture. Other experimental and electronic music forms like electro, techno, and drum-and-bass have built on these innovations. These often lyric-less musics marry science fiction themes in song titles and futurist imagery on cover art, with a post-industrial soundtrack of synthetic sounds and noises. Because the lyrics or narrative elements of these musics are pared down or absent, the techniques that make them possible are often brought to the forefront.

For Kodwo Eshun, author of More Brilliant than the Sun, the complexity of these compositions, and the high level of aptitude required of the music makers, deserve nothing less than the name “science.” “Breakbeat science” describes the application of scientific technique to the production of music. Eshun even extends the term “science” to musics that existed before the advent of this “sampledelia,” like the music of John Coltrane and Sun Ra. In this clever formulation, Eshun duly recognizes the artists’ ingenuity of aesthetic and technique.

Eshun is also interested in the philosophical possibilities of the “break.” Musical innovations always begin as breaks with tradition, as stark discontinuities with how music had been made prior to the point of innovation. For Eshun, such breaks are irrevocable, they mark an unbridgeable distance between the past and the future. What is produced stands alone in the sphere of novelty.

Tradition, Eshun argues, hinders our ability to experience the “new.” Eshun wants “to reverse traditional accounts of Black Music. Traditionally, they’ve been autobiographical or biographical, or they’ve been heavily social or political. My aim is to suspend all of that absolutely, and then, in the shock of these absences, this huge world is opened up.” But, despite Eshun’s focus on what is usually called Black Music—a term that he rejects—the effect of this position is to negate the constitutive role of racial histories in shaping representations of the future and uses of technology.

Race disappears into technology and the “Afro” in AfroFuturism is deconstructed until its effects are negligible.

If with Dery, AfroFuturism leads down a path to the constraints of history, with Eshun the future holds a new, improved, and dispersed “blackness,” free of the weight of the historical past. Eshun’s disposable history reacts to theories of black culture that place all Afrodiaporic cultural production in a linear and strictly chronological trajectory, that fail to recognize the borrowed and hybrid melange from which these creative efforts spring.

Beyond Reality

Though Eshun can be taken to task for his dismissal of any semblance of a unified black cultural tradition, he does rightly critique what might be called “black authenticity”—the tendency to believe that there are real and true ways of uniformly representing the collectivity of black diasporic experience. Black creative life has too often been determined by this impulse to “keep it real.” In order to be taken seriously, we have fostered and encouraged a long tradition of social realism in our cultural production. And we feared that to stop keeping things real was to lose the ability to recognize and protest the very real inequities in the social world. But we created a cultural environment often hostile to speculation, experimentation, and abstraction.

Yet future vision is a necessary complement to realism, for the reality of oppression without utopianism will surely lead to nihilism. And we should not think of speculative cultural production as only “escapist,” but rather as holding important insights about people’s lived conditions. Uniting the strengths of Eshun and Dery, from a decidedly feminist perspective, Fatimah Tuggar’s “cyborg realism” projects the future as a hybrid of times, places, influences, and techniques; novelty and tradition exist simultaneously.

Here imagination becomes crucial. As science fiction writer and theorist Samuel R. Delany suggests: “We need images of tomorrow; and our people [black people] need them more than most. Without an image of tomorrow, one is trapped by blind history, economics, and politics, beyond our control. One is tied up in a web, in a net, with no way to struggle free. Only by having clear and vital images of the many alternatives, good and bad, of where one can go, will we have any control over the way we may actually get there in a reality tomorrow will bring all too quickly.”

The future is neither an uncritical embrace of the past nor a singular conception of what lies ahead. It’s ours for the imagining.