Chapter Title: Afro-now-ism: The Unencumbered Black Mind is a Well Spring of Possibility
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Afro-now-ism

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Our systems, institutions, leaders, and narratives about who and what we are—our lack of compassion and limited definitions of what a valued member of society is—are failing us. They have been failing us for quite some time. Both COVID-19 and the uprising against systemic racism based on greed, fear, and territorialism are symptoms making visible the inequities that continually seethe just beneath the surface of "civil society."

At this moment, we are unequivocally confronted with the need to reimagine our humanity and what it means to be living organisms sharing the planet with many other organisms, some living, some not. This is nothing new.

However, at this moment, we can plainly see how black, brown, queer, and disabled bodies are devalued; how people who threaten the comfort of those benefiting from institutional power are expendable. Humans have the responsibility to reconceive the systems that threaten communities rendered simultaneously hyper visible and invisible by their perceived difference.

It is now time to reconstruct the idea of the human. What to include within the concept? What is truly valued? Here I am not referring to what is valuable to you, but valued period.

At stake are dignity, equal rights, and the equitable distribution of resources, as well as the survival of the planet. If this moment of twin pandemics has taught us anything, it's that denying these determinants will negatively impact all but the wealthiest among us sooner than we think.

As artificially intelligent ecosystems based on opaque algorithms and biased data proliferate and biological design gains momentum, we are confronted with the need to reimagine human supremacy. Advances in our understanding of machine learning and our single-celled bacterial cousins portend opportunities to create broad definitions of society based on mutuality and lateral coexistence among species and computational machines.

Before we can truly take advantage of these advances, humans must confront a litany of violences we have enacted upon each other. These include institutional and social constructions of race, caste, class, and gender that build and maintain current systems of power. We must also renegotiate our relationship to the spectrum of living beings deemed beneath human and the machines inching ever closer to autonomy. To (re)imagine and optimize the expectations, values, treaties, and global competitions for the near future, we must recognize, especially in the American context, that our ideals—all men are created equal, for example—are often in direct opposition to our legislated power relations.

It is helpful to imagine these roadblocks as questions: How do we rediscover ourselves anew? How do we right our collective rememory?[1] Think of rememory as an undoing, unraveling, and rewriting of corporeal constitutive elements. In the changingness of rememory, could we find transcendence? Or perhaps a trace of a former history that gives us the opportunity to draft something entirely new?

Most words we have available to think about ourselves as human construct worlds that silently imply a false dichotomy between humans on the one hand and nature and machines on the other. Escaping the recursive futures on the horizon requires understanding ourselves as participants in an expanding continuum of

1   Toni Morrison, "'I Wanted to Carve Out a World Both Culture-Specific and Race-Free': An Essay by Toni Morrison," The Guardian, August 8, 2019.

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intelligences sandwiched between technology (AI, biotech, gene editing, etc.) and a greater understanding of the ancient bacterial systems from which we emanate. Moving toward more expansive and equitable visions of what is and can be demands close examination and reconciliation of our perceived human differences.

Is what we're seeking alternative modalities or protocols for beings and non beings? Preoccupied with the then and later, we find ourselves in the now. "Afro-now-ism" is the spectacular technology of the unencumbered black mind in action. It is a willful practice that imagines the world as one needs it to be to support successful engagement—in the here and now.

Instead of waiting to reach the proverbial promised land, also known as a time in the future that may or may not manifest in your lifetime, Afro-now-ism is taking the leap and the risks to imagine and define oneself beyond systemic oppression. It is active resistance away from cynicism, disaffection, and indifference toward constructively channeling energy today. For black people in particular, it means conceiving yourself in the space of free and expansive thought and acting from a critically integrated space, allowing for more community-sustaining work.

Afro-now-ism also demands that we recognize which ideas are so deeply internalized that we no longer understand them as external. In our recognition and enactment of the future dismantlement of systemic barriers in the present moment, we challenge internalized ideas, which often stop us from acting or doing our best.

It is true these oppressive factors do not disappear from our material reality. But for a time,

the mind can, in the name of self and community care, be less discouraged by outside forces to work toward that which sustains more holistically. Systemic barriers will rear their heads again and again. But the Afro-now-ist is stronger and more immediately generative for having done the work, acted on their deepest hopes and desires without inhibition—today. Exploring where impediments are hard, where they are soft, and when they can be ignored is powerful. Technological enhancements and self-care techniques from the past, present, and future can and should be used to supersede distractions from claiming our sovereignty, wholeness, and propriety.

Afro-now-ism asks how we liberate our minds from the infinite loop of repression and oppositional thinking America imposes upon those of us forcibly enjoined to this nation. What incremental changes do we make to our internal algorithms to lurch our way to ever-more-confident means of thriving in this world? The question is not only what injustices are you fighting against, but what do you in your heart of hearts want to create?

This is a pointed question for black folks but includes the rest of society as well. Our fates, whether we like it or not, acknowledge it or not, are intermingled. Though it is not immediately legible, we sink or swim together. Still, at times, communities need space and time to build, grow, and fortify apart from the whole. That's OK as long as communities find paths to understanding in a kind of complex Venn diagram of trust from which to negotiate our shared futures.

The rapid proliferation of AI into social, political, and cultural contexts provides opportunities to change the way we define and administer

crucial social relations and manage resources. Self-organization and complexity hold important cues to how AI can help instantiate equity, cultural richness, and direct governance (or at least broad and direct input into governance). Through AI and the proliferation of smart technologies, everyday people, globally, can help define what the technological future should look like and how it should function, as well as design methods to help achieve our collective goals. Direct input from the public can also help infuse AI ecosystems with nuanced ideas, values, and beliefs toward the equitable distribution of resources and mutually beneficial systems of governance.

Black liberation rests on the construction of a non-oppositional consciousness, unburdened by the need to endlessly challenge the fears, imaginative apprehensions, oppressions, and entanglements of others. The unencumbered, undistracted black mind is a wellspring of possibility. It is a tool and way of being that changes what counts as the black experience in the twenty-first century. This is a struggle over life and death. The boundaries between sovereign consciousness, nature, valued knowledge, biotechnologies, power, and social reality are optical illusions.

The reconstruction of an intersectional black politics requires practices and theory that address the social relations of science and technology, crucially including the systems of myth, power, and time that structure our imaginations. Viewed through blackness, and the lens of the American imaginary, rememory presupposes an excavation of the terrors and joys cultivated in spite of the conditions of a nation built on slavery. We mine, disassemble, reimagine, and call on past, present, and future. We are a protopian collective advancing toward fully empowered communities, personal selves, and others.

These are the selves that the vilified and underutilized must fight for and encode into our inextricably connected future histories. If humans are to make new ways forward in partnership with nature and technology, we must first take a close look at and upend the concepts, histories, institutions, and systems that support the inequitable distribution of resources and power.

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