

BEFORE YESTERDAY WE COULD FLY



AN AFROFUTURIST PERIOD ROOM



BEFORE YESTERDAY
WE COULD FLY:
AN AFROFUTURIST
PERIOD ROOM

INTRODUCTION BY IAN ALTEVEER,
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THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART, NEW YORK

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DIRECTOR'S NOTE

The Met's renowned period rooms present a wealth of remarkable objects, architecture, and evocative displays. They also embody a complex relationship between history and authenticity that occasionally calls for reinterpretation and intervention. *Before Yesterday We Could Fly* is a newly constructed space that examines the present and future rather than offering a filtered perspective on the past. In doing so, it affords us an important opportunity to begin new, necessary conversations and illuminate stories that have yet to be told within our walls. Furnished with a wide range of works from The Met collection—from Bamileke beadwork and nineteenth-century American ceramics to contemporary art and design—the installation is centered around generations of Black creativity as interpreted through the speculative lens of Afrofuturism, as the authors discuss in this *Bulletin*. It features numerous collaborations with contemporary artists, including recent acquisitions and works commissioned specifically for the space, demonstrating our continued commitment to engaging with and supporting extraordinary artists of our time.

This project, which pushes the boundaries of what a period room can be, would not have been possible without Hannah Beachler, Lead Curator and Designer, who worked in brilliant partnership with The Met's Sarah E. Lawrence, Iris and B. Gerald Cantor Curator in Charge of the Department of European Sculpture and Decorative Arts, and Ian Alteveer, Aaron I. Fleischman Curator in the Department of Modern and Contemporary Art. Michelle D. Commander, Consulting Curator and Associate Director and Curator of the Lapidus Center for the Historical Analysis of Transatlantic Slavery at New York Public Library's Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, was a vital partner and lent her voice to the exhibition's interpretation and to the essay in this *Bulletin*. We also acknowledge the invaluable assistance of Ana Matisse Donefer-Hickie, Research Associate in the Department of European

Sculpture and Decorative Arts, and the hard work of many other colleagues at The Met who helped us imagine, develop, design, and build this incredible space, which represents a true Museum-wide collaboration.

In keeping with the collaborative ethos of Afrofuturist creative practice, the curatorial team engaged numerous intellectual partners to infuse the installation with additional ideas. In October 2020, we convened a group of artists, curators, filmmakers, and scholars to discuss the proposed room, and in January 2021 the curatorial team invited The Met community to contribute their voices, bringing insights from multiple perspectives across the Museum. One such partner was John Jennings, an author, graphic novelist, curator, and Professor of Media and Cultural Studies at the University of California at Riverside. His short graphic novella *Protocol and Response*, which was specially commissioned and appears at the back of this *Bulletin* (or the front, depending on which way you read it), animates some of the works on display and the guiding thoughts behind them. Through this groundbreaking issue of the *Bulletin* and the dynamic new installation it accompanies, we hope to start what will become a lasting conversation about the reimagined period room, in this case one powered by Afrofuturism and a space untethered by time.

We are deeply grateful to the donors who supported the installation, including the Hobson/Lucas Family Foundation, the Director's Fund at The Met, Art Mentor Foundation Lucerne, and the Terra Foundation for American Art. This *Bulletin* is supported in part by the Lila Acheson Wallace Fund for The Metropolitan Museum of Art, established by the cofounder of *Reader's Digest*.

Max Hollein
Marina Kellen French Director
The Metropolitan Museum of Art

BEFORE YESTERDAY WE COULD FLY: ENVISIONING AN AFROFUTURIST PERIOD ROOM AT THE MET

Ian Alteveer, Hannah Beachler,
and Sarah Lawrence

The period rooms within The Metropolitan Museum of Art encompass a range of curatorial approaches as well as different subjects and eras, from a first-century B.C. Roman bedroom to a twentieth-century living area designed by Frank Lloyd Wright. These rooms, and the roles they play in a global institution such as The Met, have come under particular scrutiny in recent years, questioned for their near singular focus on the domestic interiors of an affluent, predominantly white, and Eurocentric culture.¹

A period room entices its audience in a way that is different from the approach taken in other galleries. Visitors prompted to imagine themselves as inhabitants of these evocative interiors often find their curiosity intensified by the inaccessibility of the setting, typically in the form of physical barriers. Ironically, this forbidden entry invites a kind of provocation in which audiences engage imaginatively with period rooms by projecting themselves into the constructed spaces. One characteristic period room at The Met, for example, conjures an eighteenth-century French interior where we seem to intrude on the aftermath of an interrupted card game (fig. 1).

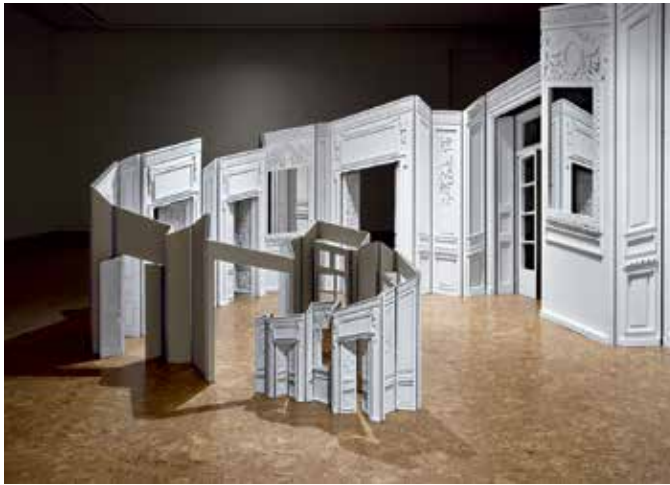
This intimate French tableau, like every period room, is a fiction: a creative assemblage of



1. Room from a hotel in the Cours d'Albert, Bordeaux, ca. 1780s. Carving attributed to Barthélemy Cabirol (1732–1786). Pine, painted and carved, with various furnishings. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Gift of Mrs. Herbert N. Straus, 1943 (43.158.1)



2. View of the exhibition *Dangerous Liaisons: Fashion and Furniture in the Eighteenth Century*, 2004



3. View of the exhibition *Katrín Sigurðardóttir at The Met: Boiseries*, 2010–11



4. View of Alex and Maira Kalman's installation *Sara Berman's Closet*, 2015, as exhibited at The Met in 2017

furnishings and objects that were never together in the same room at the same time. The compelling engagement of the viewer's imagination — and thus the success of the period room as an immersive experience — depends on the invisibility of the curator's work and on a veneer of authenticity. Yet to create a period room requires, paradoxically, an interpretive curatorial act: a plausible, instructive proposition of historical re-creation.²

In recent decades, curators have taken a variety of approaches in the reconsideration of what might be possible within The Met's period rooms. For the 2004 exhibition *Dangerous Liaisons: Fashion and Furniture in the Eighteenth Century*, mannequins in period dress enacted suggestive narratives within the French eighteenth-century interiors of The Wrightsman Galleries (fig. 2), an attempt to enhance the filmic, stage-like aspect of those theatrical spaces. Katrín Sigurðardóttir's installation *Boiseries* (2010–11) distilled and abstracted the same spaces to explore the sense of disorientation and curiosity felt in the contemplation of the period rooms (fig. 3). More recently, Maira and Alex Kalman's installation *Sara Berman's Closet* (2017) was juxtaposed provocatively with the Worsham-Rockefeller Dressing Room, positing the significance of even the most mundane domestic space (fig. 4). The Met has also staged performances of dance, opera, and theater within its historic interiors and period rooms, exploiting the immersive experience of these spaces and critiquing the embedded issues of privileged access.

In 2021, The Met's newest room considers domestic lives previously omitted from the scope of the Museum's period displays: the home of an African American family based on the historical settlement of Seneca Village, a vibrant, predominantly Black community that flourished in the mid-nineteenth century just a few hundred yards west of The Met's current location (fig. 5). Seneca Village thrived from the 1820s until 1857, when the city used a process of eminent domain to raze the site and create Central Park.³ This period room imagines a different future for the



5. View of the Seneca Village site in Central Park, 2021



6. Floral-printed pearlware body/rim shard, 1800–1840.
Ceramic. New York City Archaeological Repository
(CV-058: 23, 43, 152)

7. Installation view of *Before Yesterday We Could Fly: An Afrofuturist Period Room*, 2021

residents of Seneca Village. Through its furnishings, art, and spatial organization, the installation represents a domestic interior that is only one proposition for what might have been, had the settlement been allowed to thrive into the present and beyond.

Before Yesterday We Could Fly pushes the boundaries of what a period room can accomplish. Beginning with the premise of a historical fiction — informed by deep research into the past — this curatorial collaboration creates a domestic space that can only be imagined: a history that has been erased, linked to a future that must be envisioned. The “period” of this room also manifests a complexity that scholar and writer Saidiya Hartman has often addressed with regard to the difficult and continual legacy of slavery and its consequential aftermath: “[A] way of thinking about the afterlife of slavery in regard to how we inhabit historical time is the sense of temporal entanglement, where the past, the present, and the future are not discrete and cut off from one another . . . that we live the simultaneity of that entanglement.”⁴ This period room is thus a vehicle through which visitors are invited to recollect a disrupted past and reclaim an alternate future.

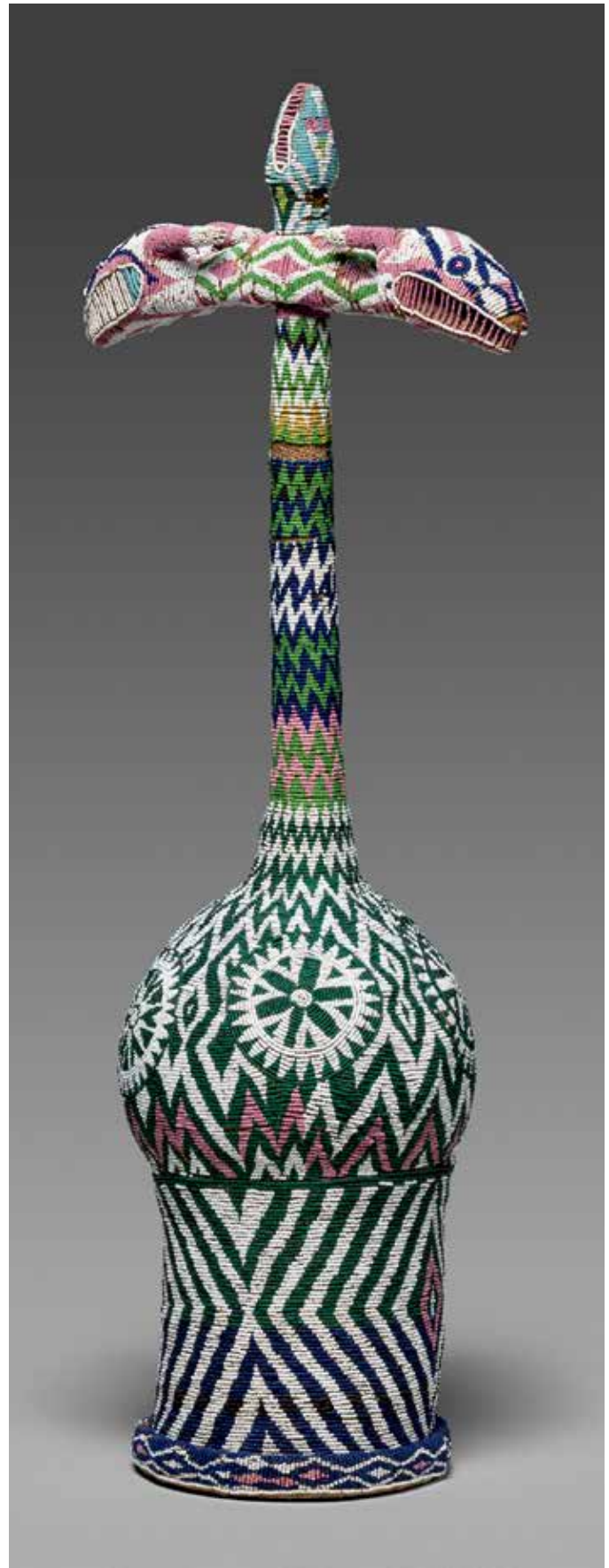
In order to envision what might have been if Seneca Village had not been destroyed, the curatorial team behind *Before Yesterday We Could Fly* turned to the speculative creative mode of Afrofuturism. This term, coined by the critic Mark Dery in 1994, describes a range of aesthetic and philosophical practices, from the visionary artistry of musicians such as Sun Ra to the novels of the science-fiction writer Samuel R. Delany. In subsequent decades, the understanding and application of Afrofuturism expanded from speculative literature into design and the visual arts in order to describe work that imagines a different present and future, but one that always centers Black agency, self-determination, and creative liberation.⁵ As curator Naima J. Keith describes in an essay for the 2013 exhibition *The Shadows Took Shape* at the Studio Museum in Harlem, which she coorganized with Zoé Whitley, “Artists working within this rubric





8. Thomas W. Commeraw (active 1796–1819). Jar, 1796–1819. Stoneware, H. 9½ in. (24.1 cm), Diam. 6¾ in. (17.1 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Rogers Fund, 1918 (18.95.13)

9. Ceremonial palm-wine vessel, 19th–20th century. Cameroon, Grassfields region. Gourd, glass beads, cloth, cane, and wood, H. 30¼ in. (76.8 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Purchase, Gifts in memory of Bryce Holcombe, 1986 (1986.336a, b)





10. Cyrus Kabiru (Kenyan, born 1984). *Miyale Ya Blue*, 2020. Steel and found objects, $23\frac{5}{8} \times 25\frac{5}{8} \times 5\frac{7}{8}$ in. ($60 \times 65 \times 15$ cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Purchase, Wendy Fisher Gift, 2021 (2021.282)

not only critique the present-day dilemmas of people of color through historical fiction, fantasy, and magic realism, but also revise, interrogate, and reexamine actual historical events.”⁶

The challenge of forging this space as a site of remembrance, but also as a vision of what might be, required exploring a nineteenth-century past whose surviving physical presence is limited. An excavation at the site of Seneca Village in 2011 nonetheless uncovered a surprising amount of material, including a large cache of ceramic potsherds (fig. 6). From these remains, the archaeological team pieced together a convincing vision of what family life and traditions may have been. As they report in their published findings, “just as in so many other communities, for Seneca Village, displacement and eviction had drastic consequences. . . . Because the visual is so important

to memory, the erasure of such places from the landscape silences them.”⁷ This obliteration, as Michelle Commander discusses in her essay in this *Bulletin*, gives rise to oceanic waves of consequence that crash continuously into the present. Our informed speculation about the past, together with an ingenious design for the future by Hannah Beachler, thus provides both a visionary leap forward and a radical counterpoint to so much historical oblivion.

The material manifestation of temporal fluidity within The Met’s new Afrofuturist period room is realized through the open plan of a house (figs. 7, 13). The vernacular structure of a nineteenth-century wooden kitchen connects a sleek modernist frame to the futurist living room. These two spaces are inhabited concurrently, not sequentially — one centered around a brick hearth, the other by a five-sided television — and each is the focus of familial congregation, storytelling, and innovation. Both the hearth and the television are vehicles of transportation, whether alchemical or technological in spirit.

The rooms are furnished with a kaleidoscope of objects from The Met collection to suggest the residents’ care and guardianship of the past, present, and future. These include eighteenth- and nineteenth-century glass, metalwork, and ceramics (fig. 8); Sub-Saharan African devotional works that represent the spiritual traditions of the residents’ ancestors from across the Atlantic (fig. 9); and visionary new additions to the Museum’s collection by artists and designers of the African Diaspora (figs. 10–12). Arrayed within the house, these artworks enliven the room with centuries of accumulated history, tradition, knowledge, and invention.

This spectral structure and all the treasures within it inhabit a gallery clad with a spectacular, repeating design by artist Njideka Akunyili Crosby (see illustration on inside front cover). To represent the rich history layered upon the site and create a dynamic scaffolding for her composition, Akunyili Crosby combined photographic images from both sides of the Atlantic alongside relevant archival

11. Roberto Lugo (American, born 1981). *Digable Underground*, 2021. Glazed stoneware, enamel paint, and luster, 19½ × 13 × 10 in. (49.5 × 33 × 25.4 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Purchase, The Kay Unger Family Foundation Gift, 2021 (2021.256a–c)





12. Tourmaline (American, born 1983). *Morning Cloak*, 2020.
Dye sublimation print, 30½ × 30 in. (77.5 × 76.2 cm).
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Purchase,
Lila Acheson Wallace Gift, 2021 (2021.272)

imagery, such as an 1856 map of Seneca Village and ambrotypes of nineteenth-century Black New Yorkers like the Lyons family, who owned land there. She then evoked the lushness of the village's sylvan locale — its verdant landscape and self-sustaining agriculture — by overlaying a rich foliate design derived from the okra plant. Imported to the Americas from Africa through the brutal Middle Passage alongside millions of enslaved people, okra is valued for its nourishing green seed pods and cherished for its resilience and adaptability. Here, on a distant shore, it thrives against all odds, symbolizing so much of what was never lost and what waits to be uncovered, just beneath the surface.

1. Two notable exceptions are the Astor Chinese Garden Court and the Damascus Room. **2.** For recent discussions, see, for example, Jeremy Aynsley, "The Modern Period Room—A Contradiction in Terms?" in *The Modern Period Room: The Construction of the Exhibited Interior 1870–1950*, edited by Penny Sparke, Brenda Martin, and Trevor Keeble (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), pp. 8–30; John Harris, *Moving Rooms: The Trade in Architectural Salvages* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2007); and Deborah L. Krohn, "Perfecting the Past: Period Rooms between Disneyland and the White Box," in *The Museum in the Cultural Sciences: Collecting, Displaying, and Interpreting Material Culture in the Twentieth Century*, edited by Peter N. Miller (New York: Bard Graduate Center, 2021), pp. 209–16. **3.** Roy Rosenzweig and Elizabeth Blackmar, *The Park and the People: A History of Central Park* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1992), pp. 59–60, 66–73. **4.** Thora Siemsen and Saidiya Hartman, "On Working with Archives: An Interview with Writer Saidiya Hartman [April 18, 2018]," in *The Creative Independent* (Brooklyn, N.Y., 2021); <https://thecreativeindependent.com/people/saidiya-hartman-on-working-with-archives/>. **5.** Mark Dery, "Black to the Future: Interviews with Samuel R. Delany, Greg Tate, and Tricia Rose," in *Flame Wars: The Discourse of Cyberculture*, edited by Mark Dery (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1994), pp. 179–222. **6.** Naima J. Keith, "Looking for the Invisible," in *The Shadows Took Shape*, by Naima J. Keith et al., exh. cat. (New York: Studio Museum in Harlem, 2013), p. 13. **7.** Diana diZerega Wall, Nan A. Rothschild, and Meredith B. Linn, "Constructing Identity in Seneca Village," in *Archaeology of Identity and Dissonance: Contexts for a Brave New World*, edited by Diane F. George and Bernice Kurchin (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2019), p. 175.





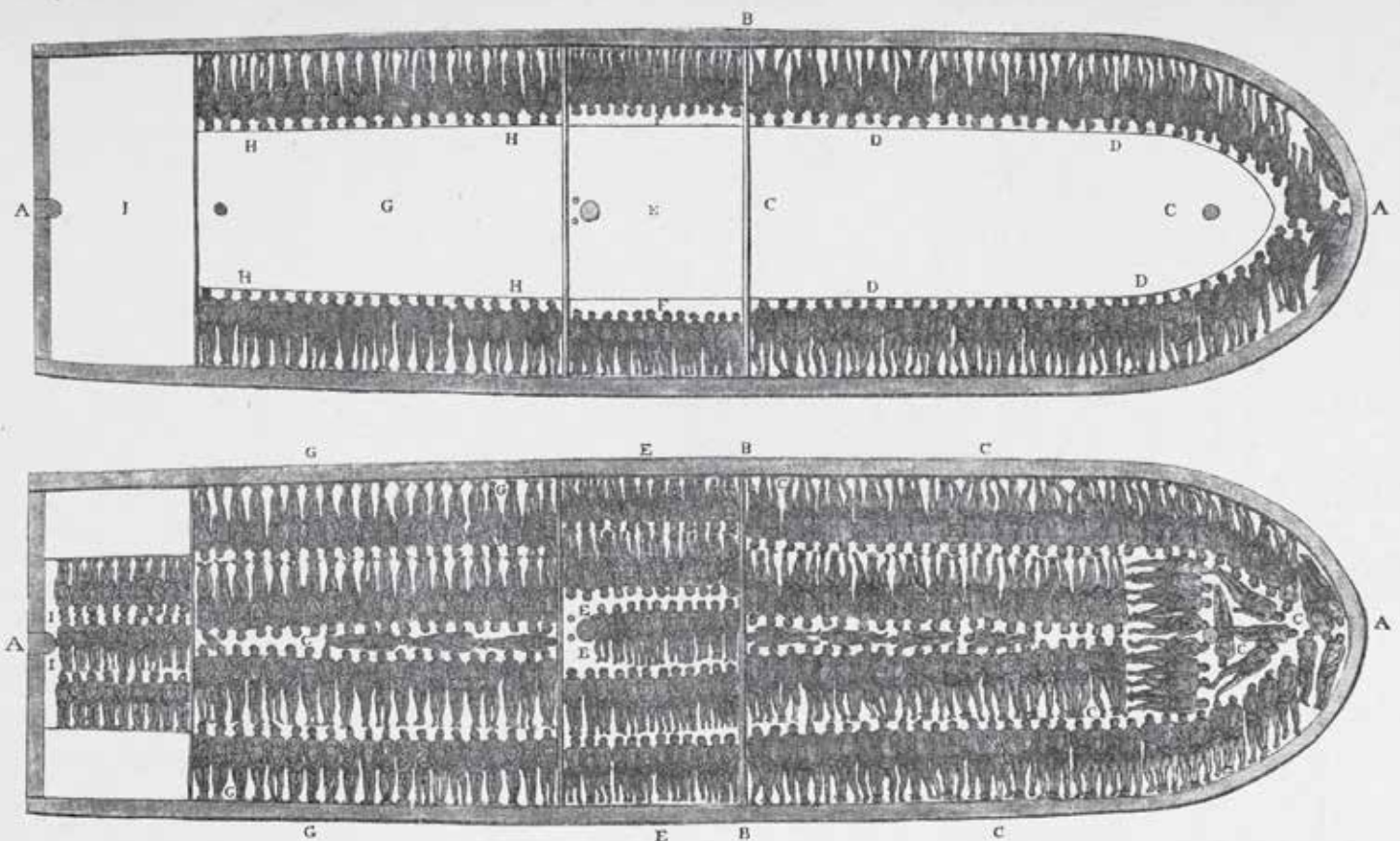
PAST/PRESENT/FUTURE: SPECULATIVE WORLDS AND THE PROMISES OF FLIGHT

Michelle D. Commander

Many of the people were captured for Slavery. The ones that could fly shed their wings. They couldn't take their wings across the water on the slave ships. Too crowded, don't you know. The folks were full of misery, then. Got sick with the up and down of the sea. So they forgot about flyin when they could no longer breathe the sweet scent of Africa. Say the people who could fly kept their power, although they shed their wings. They kept their secret magic in the land of slavery. They looked the same as the other people from Africa who had been coming over, who had dark skin. Say you couldn't tell anymore one who could fly from one who couldn't.

— Virginia Hamilton, *The People Could Fly: American Black Folktales* (1985)

It is July 12, 1787. Just off the West African coast, slave ship crewmembers and tradesmen observe the scene as hundreds of African captives are taken to the bowels of the ships *Hope* and *Industry*.¹ Every once in a while, the sensory excesses stop passersby in their tracks, though the scene is not exactly unusual. The trade in



Plan af slafskeppet Brooks.

Dimensioner:

Längden af mellandäcket A A.....	100 fot — 0 tum	Längden af männens rum C C å mellandäck 46 fot — 0 tum	Längden af gossarnes rum E E	13 fot — 9 tum
Största bredden å mellandäckets insida B B B	25 » — 4 »	Bredden af männens rum C C å do 25 » — 4 »	Bredden däraf	25 » — 0 »
Lasttrumets djup O O O.....	10 » — 0 »	Längden af galleriet D D i männens rum 46 » — 0 »	Längden af kvinnornas rum G G.....	28 » — 6 »
Höjden mellan däck, från däck till däck	8 » — 8 »	Bredden däraf å hvarje sida	Bredden däraf.....	23 » — 6 »
Storleken af den plats, som beräknades för hvarje slaf:				
För männen	6 fot — 0 tum + 1 fot — 4 tum	För gossarne	5 fot — 0 tum + 1 fot 2 tum	
» kvinnorna	5 » — 10 » + 1 » — 4 »	» flickorna	4 » — 6 » + 1 »	

Slafvarnes nominella antal enligt planen var 482, men deras verkliga var 609.

13 (previous spread). Installation view of *Before Yesterday We Could Fly: An Afrofuturist Period Room*, 2021

14. Plan of the slave ship *Brooks*, 1896. The New York Public Library Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Jean Blackwell Hutson Research and Reference Division (b11668687)

human beings has been a feature of the region for well over a century now. At the moment, it is the persistent, haunting chorale of frightened women, children, and men who are chained together in preparation for a fateful voyage across the Atlantic Ocean. The men who lead these unfortunate souls through dusty pathways hush the weeping human cargo, striking those who do not move as they are instructed. The weather is sticky, hot, and humid. A stench fills what little air there is, the result of the captives' weeks-long languishing wait in dingy, dank dungeons where bodily fluids and sickness passed between them and there was little air to breathe (fig. 14).

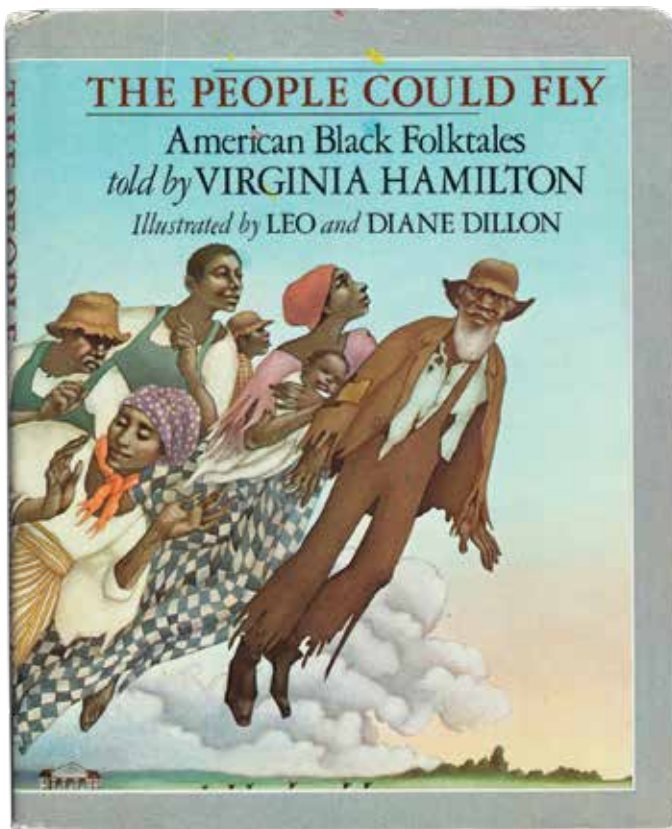
The captives' condition says more about the enslavers than about the enslaved, who had effectively, if temporarily, been stripped of their bodily autonomy. And now, they would suffer for several weeks more, packed together tightly most of the time, a community established in bodily, psychic, and spatial trauma. Some of the African captives looked into the eyes of others in recognition of their mutual miseries, tendering something like a knowing smile. Women cared for the youngest among them, singing lullabies whose lyrics promised sweet dreams and the freedom of not-too-distant tomorrows. Others still covertly planned rebellion under the cover of darkness, forging alliances and a sense of community despite the enormity of their suffering.

On this same day, thousands of miles away in America, delegates have gathered for the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia to debate components of the draft Constitution. Today's subject is the use of population numbers to apportion representatives to each state. Three-fifths of a state's enslaved population would be counted. The practice did not afford enslaved people rights as citizens but acknowledged their existence as property in order to increase white political might. The Southern planter class now had further incentive to participate in the lucrative trade, as they could increase their population exponentially by engaging indirectly or directly in the trade as slaveholders, merchants, and tradesmen.

In a few short months, the British Parliament, having been made aware of the unmentionable conditions aboard slave ships, will continue their deliberations about mandating new regulations, including those intended to make the slave trade more humane by relieving overcrowding during the transportation of captives across the Middle Passage, the route commonly taken from West Africa to the Americas. They will develop a formula for determining how to ship human beings more benevolently on slave ships. First, the space occupied by each would need to meet certain guidelines:

That it shall not be lawful for any master, or other person taking or having the charge or command of any British ship or vessel whatever, which shall clear out from any port of this kingdom . . . to have on board, at any one time, or to convey, carry, bring, or transport slaves from the coast of Africa to any parts beyond sea, in any such ship or vessel, in any greater number than in the proportion of five such slaves for every three tons of the burthen of such ship or vessel, over and above the said burthen of such ship or vessel, so far as the said ship or vessel shall not exceed two hundred and one tons . . . That if there shall be, in any such ship or vessel, any more than two fifth parts of the slaves who shall be children, and who shall not exceed four feet four inches in height, then every five such children (over and above the aforesaid proportion of two fifths) shall be deemed and taken to be equal to four of the said slaves within the true intent and meaning of this act.²

Myriad calculations such as these eighteenth-century formulations animated political debates over space, race, speculative futures, and property as Americans and Europeans expanded their slavery and colonization efforts across the Atlantic world. Although these guidelines were championed by activists and



15. Cover of Virginia Hamilton's *The People Could Fly* (1985), by Leo and Diane Dillon

anti-slavery-minded lawmakers and viewed as progress toward abolition, such rhetoric makes clear to present-day readers of the law the fact that the barbarism of the slave trade was, in effect, quite ordinary. The numerical directives are expressed in a detached manner, the rationale for the needed regulations summarized without sufficient emotion or care.

In his 1751 book *Observations Concerning the Increase of Mankind*, the scientist, philosopher, and statesman Benjamin Franklin outlined his vision for the building of a world in which whiteness reigns:

*[T]he Number of purely white People in the World is proportionably [sic] very small. . . . I could wish their Numbers were increased. And while we are, as I may call it, Scouring our Planet, by clearing America of Woods, and so making this Side of our Globe reflect a brighter Light to the Eyes of Inhabitants in Mars or Venus, why should we in the Sight of Superior Beings, darken its People? Why increase the Sons of Africa, by Planting them in America, where we have so fair an Opportunity, by excluding all Blacks and Tawneys, of increasing the lovely White and Red? But perhaps I am partial to the Complexion of my Country, for such Kind of Partiality is natural to Mankind.*³

Franklin's discussion is an expression of his desire for a speculative white future, one that could be made only via continued massacres, greed, dehumanization, and land dispossession. The literary and cultural historian Saidiya Hartman quite soberly explains how such early white nationalist thought and its attendant institutions mark the contemporary moment: "If slavery persists as an issue in the political life of black America, it is not because of an antiquarian obsession with bygone days or the burden of a too-long memory, but because black lives are still imperiled and devalued by a racial calculus and a political arithmetic that were entrenched centuries ago. This is

the afterlife of slavery — skewed life chances, limited access to health and education, premature death, incarceration, and impoverishment.”⁴ Indeed, this was the world America’s founding fathers deliberately calculated.

Back on the slave ships *Hope* and *Industry*, the once-free Africans now advance into a temporal void, slipping beyond the horizon. Detached from kith and kin and disconnected from the bountiful lands and cultures on and with which they had been raised, the captives are en route to futures uncertain. The experiences endured by coming generations would be marked by one terror after another, with the incessant regulation of Black people’s movement, barbaric violations of their bodies, and the intentional refusal to recognize them as full citizens becoming mundane features of life for them in the so-called New World. They will find it necessary to collectively dream up new and increasingly radical ways of subverting the future that enslavers intended for them.

Speculative Flights

speculate (verb):

1. to engage in thought or reflection; meditate (often followed by *on*, *upon*, or a clause).
2. to indulge in conjectural thought.
3. to engage in any business transaction involving considerable risk or the chance of large gains, especially to buy and sell commodities, stocks, etc., in the expectation of a quick or very large profit.⁵

Before yesterday, we could fly.

In the titular story from Virginia Hamilton’s children’s collection *The People Could Fly: American Black Folktales*, the author’s retelling of the Flying African myth holds that some African captives shed their literal wings, which would not fit into the slave ships, but still maintained the ability to fly, while others lost the skill (fig. 15). As the narrator explains,

“you couldn’t tell anymore one who could fly from one who couldn’t,” suggesting that those who could fly used their ability only when necessary. At the end of the tale, enslaved people tire of the backbreaking work and ceaseless brutality of enslavers and overseers, electing collectively to fly away from the plantation. When the enslaved man Toby is threatened with the slave driver’s whip and his enslaver’s gun, he laughs and chants a signal to those among them who could fly, singing, “Buba yali . . . buba tambe.” And they flew:

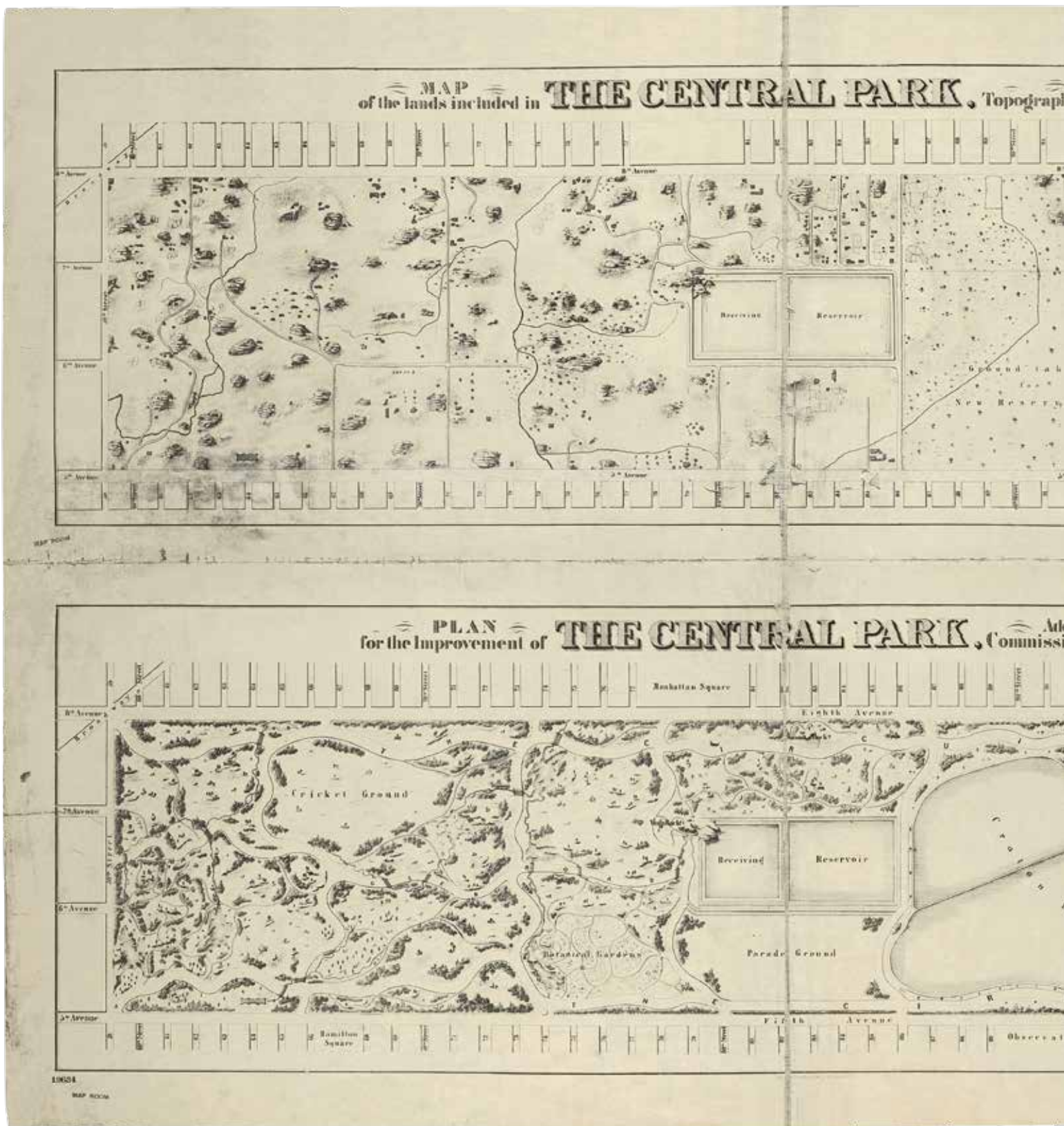
Old and young who were called slaves and could fly joined hands. Say like they would ring-sing. But they didn’t shuffle in a circle. They didn’t sing. They rose on the air. They flew in a flock that was black against the heavenly blue. Black crows or black shadows. It didn’t matter, they went so high. Way above the plantation, way over the slavery land. Say they flew away to Free-dom.

And the old man, old Toby, flew behind them, takin care of them. He wasn’t cryin. He wasn’t laughin. He was the seer. His gaze fell on the plantation where the slaves who could not fly waited. “Take us with you!” Their looks spoke it but they were afraid to shout it. Toby couldn’t take them with him. Hadn’t the time to teach them to fly. They must wait for a chance to run. “Goodie-bye!” the old man called Toby spoke to them, poor souls! And he was flyin gone.⁶

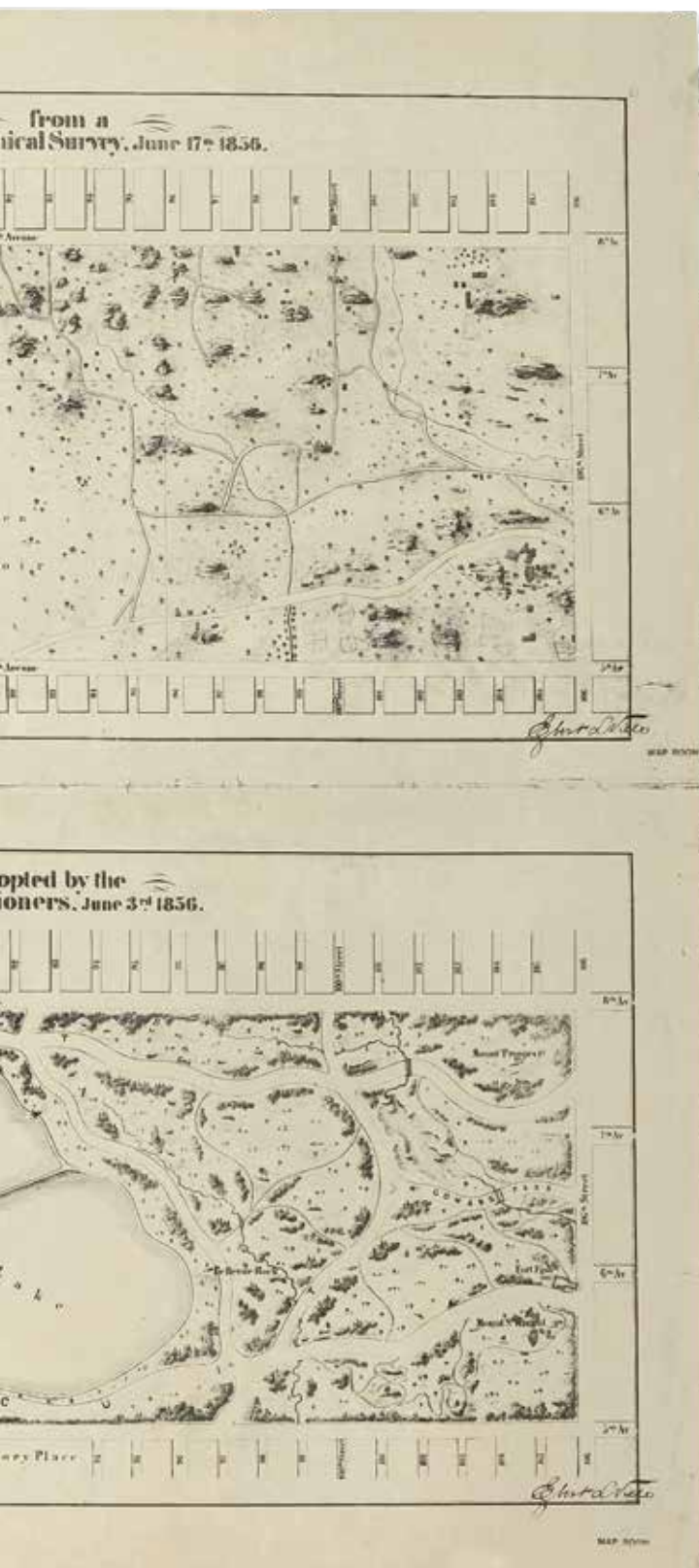
Those who remained were not without hope. They could self-liberate. Flight was a mindset, one that could be activated by remaining still and strategic or through movements away from the plantation: by foot, train, and other modes of transport. The historian Edward Baptist notes that enslaved people were keenly aware that taking control of their own mobility would be key to survival: “Enslaved people recognized that the slavery they were experiencing

was shaped by the ability of whites to move African Americans' bodies wherever they wanted. Forced migration created markets that allowed whites to extract profit from human beings. It brought about a kind of isolation that permitted enslavers to use torture to extract new kinds of labor."⁷ Circumstances demanded that enslaved people continue to live speculatively to counter the kinds of financial investments and institutions that had forced them to exist in such a cruel, precarious state.

Numerous stories from across the Atlantic world recall the Flying Africans, or those African captives who jumped from slave ships in hopes of returning to their homelands. Other narratives recount the flights of enslaved people who were bound to plantations in the New World, such as the story retold in *Drums and Shadows* by the informant Priscilla McCullough, from Darien, Georgia: "Duh slabes wuz out in duh fiel wukin. All ub a sudden dey git tuhgedduh an staht tuh moob roun in a ring. Roun dey go fastuhnfastuh. Den one by one dey riz up an take wing an fly lak a bud."⁸ The enslaved people in McCullough's version moved collectively: first in a circular fashion, recalling a religious ring shout, in which participants sing and move about in a circle, shuffling their feet and quietly affirming the circuitousness of African diasporic time. As they shuffled, they picked up speed. And then, one by one, the Flying Africans ascended instinctively into the air, choreographed like birds in murmuration. By rejecting the bleak futures that awaited them, enslaved people used flight to take back control of their bodies, alerting speculators in slavery that their investments in human property were risky at best. It was not just the financial returns that were uncertain; enslaved Africans and their descendants would not lie prone. Indeed, they turned the idea of speculation upside down, detaching the act of speculating from economics and placing it into a radical epistemology for living life. For the enslaved, speculation's conjectural question of "what if" left open infinite possibilities for living under plantation slavery and/or in flight.



16. Egbert L. Viele (1825–1902). *Map of the Lands Included in the Central Park, from a Topographical Survey*, 1856. The New York Public Library, Lionel Pincus and Princess Firyal Map Division (b14019804)



In *Afro-Atlantic Flight: Speculative Returns and the Black Fantastic* (2017), I wrote about the philosophy that undergirds and continues to inform psychic and physical flights and patterns of Black migration: "Speculation became a subversive way of life for Black Americans, who were determined to self-actualize, forge communities, and experience pleasure on their own terms. Afro-speculation as a modality for living is conjectural and conditional; the evidentiary matters not. Afro-speculation is an investment in the unseen and precarious; it is a gamble. It is the belief in the possibility of the establishment of new, utopic realities outside of dominant society despite the lack of proof that Black social life is conceivable."⁹ For the community-minded, Black speculative postures elide the individualistic tendencies of capitalism, centering instead the liberation of the collective.

With these realities in mind, enslaved people across the Atlantic world took flight in a number of ways, imagining existence anew. They believed that life would become more livable if they could imagine the possibilities beyond their current circumstances. Even in religious worship, references to flight, freedom, home, and heaven took on multiple meanings, as enslaved people found respite in psychologically existing on a different plane as they negotiated the world. In the United States, some ran away from plantations, following the North Star, which they believed would guide them to freedom. In societies in the Caribbean and South America, fugitives from slavery and freepersons built self-sustaining maroon and quilombo communities — sometimes alongside Indigenous people — to fortify the strength of their encampments in mountains and swamps. Others took flight by strategizing dynamic forms of resistance and rebellion with members of the kinship networks they had built aboard slave ships and in the plantations to which they were sold and in which they labored. And as states slowly abolished slavery, formerly enslaved people established settlements with one another, making new lives in their freer existence.

While the torturous passage across the Atlantic and into the New World had greatly altered African captives' relation to water, it also reconfigured enslaved peoples' relation to land. Stolen from their loved ones, captive Africans would never see their homelands again. They were rendered the property of others and in the eyes of their enslavers had lost a measure of control over their own persons. Enslaved Africans were moved from place to place at their enslavers' will, their homeland and New World loved ones be damned. From slave ship to auction block, from plantation to plantation, from rural outpost to growing city, Africans in America contended with legislative policies and intentionally drawn geographies that aimed to monitor, restrict, and regulate their movements by law and by force.

Seneca Village: Imminence, Eminence, Immanence

The destruction of the peace and existence of a thriving Black community is, and always was, imminent. In 2011, Columbia University's Institute for the Exploration of Seneca Village History collaborated with the Central Park Conservancy to begin an archaeological excavation of Seneca Village, a thriving community that was razed to make way for New York City's Central Park in 1857 (fig. 16). Long forgotten in public memory until recent years, Seneca Village was situated approximately from 82nd to 89th Streets between 7th and 8th Avenues. The community began to take shape in 1825, shortly after John and Elizabeth Whitehead subdivided and sold several parcels of their land to African American individuals and to the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, which needed the land to construct a burial ground. In the first twenty years of its existence, Seneca Village was almost exclusively a Black community populated by those who wanted to escape overcrowded, unsafe, and overtly racist neighborhoods in Lower Manhattan. In Seneca Village, they could imagine the possibility for much brighter futures, even if it was a less-developed area. With the



17. Perfume bottle, ca. 1850s. Frosted glass, H. 2 in. (5 cm). New York City Archaeological Repository (GV-503: 23)



18. Shard from a “watch-spring” jar or jug, mid-18th century–1815. Salt-glazed stoneware. New York City Archaeological Repository (CV-020: 168)

devastation brought about by the Irish potato famine, immigrants arrived, bringing new residents to Seneca Village in the 1840s. A small German community existed there as well.

Seneca Village was likely an enclave in which its inhabitants could move about freely, find joy, and breathe. Although New York State abolished slavery in 1827, the conditions for Black Americans remained precarious. The passage of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, which encoded into law the right of enslavers to reclaim any enslaved property that escaped to a free state, exacerbated an already highly dangerous situation for the city’s Black population, particularly affecting the mobility of women and children, who were under the very real threat of being kidnapped and sold into slavery in the South. In an 1836 pamphlet describing the dangers that existed in New York, the Black abolitionist and activist David Ruggles cautioned,

My depressed countrymen, we are all liable; your wives and children are at the mercy of merciless kidnappers. We have no protection in law, because the legislators withhold justice. We must no longer depend on the interposition of Manumission or Anti-Slavery Societies, in the hope of peaceable and just protection; where such outrages are committed, peace and justice cannot dwell. While we are subject to be thus inhumanly practised upon, no man is safe; we must look to our own safety and protection from kidnappers; remembering that “self-defence is the first law of nature.”¹⁰

Given this level of uncertainty, a settlement like Seneca Village would have afforded this group of renters, landowners, and immigrants a sense of safety and relief from the stresses of everyday discrimination: a spatial and psychic buffer from the everyday dangers that existed in other parts of Manhattan.

It was particularly devastating for the community, then, when the city began the process of



19. Escutcheon, 19th century. Salt-glazed stoneware and copper alloy, L. 2 in. (5 cm). New York City Archaeological Repository (S-051: 70)

invoking eminent domain in order to take ownership of land for the creation of a large municipal park that, it was envisioned, would compare with or exceed in beauty and extravagance the public green spaces found in Europe. Eminent domain laws permit governments to reclaim land for public use, offering landowners arbitrary amounts of cash in exchange for their property. Over the course of American history, eminent domain processes have disrupted and upset Black communities to establish parks, more expensive housing developments, interstate roads, and other infrastructure projects that often perpetuate inequality. These processes can be controversial, and landowners tend to fight for the rights to their plots in the courts, with governmental entities often characterizing the communities in question as bastions of criminality and/or filthy blights on developing cities and towns. An 1856 *New-York Daily Times* article, for instance, described Seneca Village as “a neat *little settlement* . . . [that] present[s] a pleasing contrast in their habits and the appearance of their dwellings to the Celtic [Irish] occupants . . . in the lower part of the Park. . . . If some of the hogs, goats, and other inmates of the shanties in this vicinity do not die of the yellow fever this Summer, it will only be because Death himself hesitates to enter such dirty hovels.”¹¹

Other publications irreverently used racial and ethnic epithets to describe Seneca Village residents, creating a false narrative about the “need” to clean up the place — all in the service of rationalizing the city’s plans to take over the land. By the 1870s, J. F. Richmond’s *New York and Its Institutions, 1609–1873: The Bright Side of New York* was already celebrating the spectacular features of Central Park, in particular the amount of recreational space compared to that of the European parks from which the city had drawn its initial inspiration, and for ascending into modernity in the European ways that city officials had so admired. In Richmond’s narrative about the extravagances within the park’s construction, he describes Seneca Village and the surrounding settlements as “perhaps the most broken of the

island, and considered by many irredeemable.”¹² The biased representations that almost always accompany uses of eminent domain, then, can have long-lasting ramifications, as they reify notions that Black and immigrant spaces ought to be policed, surveilled, and held under the constant threat of sanction.

What Black oral histories and memories had held over time, and what the 2011 archaeological project proved, is that Seneca Village was a very established community. The fragments unearthed during the archaeological dig revealed that the properties were a mix of wood-frame homes, some with barns and sheds in the rear. While some of the descriptors regarding a lack of development and sensory excesses of the community might have been partially true, given that there was pollution produced by local tanneries and a bone-boiling factory in the area, what the media intentionally papered over in the nineteenth century is that Seneca Village was nonetheless quite a diverse and promising community. Its residents belonged to vigilance committees and anti-slavery organizations, all of which agitated for rights and provided care for the City’s Black community. By 1855, Seneca Village was also an overall rarity in New York, in that approximately half of its residents owned their property and many of its landowners had the right to vote. The unearthed layers surveyed at the Seneca Village site contained evidence of lives fully lived nearly two centuries ago, including fragments of thriving domestic spaces such as pieces of glass, stoneware dishes, a perfume bottle, a hair comb, a kettle, a copper-alloy decorative escutcheon, a small leather shoe belonging to a woman or child, and the stone foundation of a home (figs. 17–24).

In photographs taken of the excavation at Seneca Village, the way that life in and around Central Park carries on while the dig proceeds is striking. Park visitors can be seen relaxing on the grass with friends and family, while a rare person looks on with curiosity. There is a tendency for people to mind their own business, especially in bustling cities. Yet



20. Kettle found inside a roasting pan, 19th century. Iron, Diam. 3½ in. (9 cm). New York City Archaeological Repository (S-053: 126)

many people negotiate the places they live and visit as if all that ever was is now. This presentist way of living can render one unaware of the history and the ways that the past informs the present moment: that the past can offer lessons for being better contemporary citizens. What is it that we remember? Why do we forget what we once actively endeavored to remember? What are the future uses of memory?

(Social) Science, Memory, and Afrofuturism

Speaking about her novel *Beloved* (1987), Toni Morrison notably lamented the absence of mentions of slavery in public history: “There is no place you or I can go, to think about or not think about, to summon the presences of, or recollect the absences of slaves; nothing that reminds us of the ones who made the journey and of those who did not make it. There is no suitable memorial or plaque or wreath or wall or park or skyscraper lobby. There’s no 300-foot tower. There’s no small bench by the road. There is not even a tree scored, an initial that I can visit or you can visit in Charleston or Savannah or New York or Providence, or better still, on the banks of the Mississippi. And because such a place doesn’t exist (that I know of), the book had to.”¹³ Through magical realism, Morrison crafted an inventive neo-slave narrative, a post-1965 literary genre that is informed by slavery’s historical archive to offer more accurate representations of enslaved people and their interior lives. Paired with Morrison’s speculative imagination, the archival evidence assisted her in crafting a haunted domestic space in which her characters are compelled to process the past. An embodied ghost — the returned daughter of the protagonist (who committed the infanticide that caused the ghost’s passing) and a representative of those who crossed the Middle Passage — is used as a vessel through which Morrison’s characters engage with their traumatic past and present lives, the horrors with which they continue to struggle.

In the period just after the legal successes of the Civil Rights movement, other cultural



21. Shoe, 19th century. Leather and textile. New York City Archaeological Repository (S-074: 194)



22. Comb, 19th century. Gutta-percha, L. 1¼ in. (3.2 cm). New York City Archaeological Repository (S-070: 57)

producers — writers, filmmakers, historical preservationists — inventively addressed the damage that hundreds of years of silence and shame about slavery had caused, engaging in a kind of interdisciplinary archaeology to determine the ways that the institution of slavery and its postbellum iterations haunt the present and future. The science fiction writer Samuel Delany discussed the significance of such a range of speculative imagining in his 1978 essay “The Necessity of Tomorrow(s)”: “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.”¹⁴ Although speculative thought had been embraced by people of African descent over the course of centuries, the term “Afrofuturism” was coined by the scholar Mark Dery in 1994 to encapsulate a new turn: “Speculative fiction that treats African-American themes and addresses African-American concerns in the context of twentieth-century technoculture — and, more generally, African-American signification that appropriates images of technology and a prosthetically enhanced future.”¹⁵ Afrofuturist projects use technology, fantastical elements, magical realism, and sometimes a combination of mythologies from African and diasporic cultures alongside Western science to explore, in the words of writer and theorist Kodwo Eshun, “the historical terms, the everyday implications of forcibly imposed dislocation, and the constitution of Black Atlantic subjectivities: from slave to negro to coloured to évolu   to black to African to African American.”¹⁶

One can hear articulations of a proto-Afrofuturism in the scientific rhetoric used by Civil Rights leaders as they agitated for liberation. For instance, on the eve of his assassination, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. gave his prescient, future-minded “I’ve Been to the Mountaintop” speech at the Bishop

Charles Mason Temple, Memphis. Speaking with foreknowledge of the many threats to his life for challenging the racial order and for daring to demand safe conditions and fair compensation for workers, King urged his followers to use a particular brand of nonviolent science that the white-supremacist establishment could neither comprehend nor permanently defeat:

We aren't going to let any mace stop us. We are masters in our nonviolent movement in disarming police forces, they don't know what to do. I've seen them so often. I remember in Birmingham, Alabama, when we were in that majestic struggle there, we would move out of the 16th Street Baptist Church day after day, by the hundreds we would move out. And Bull Connor would tell them to send the dogs forth, and they did come, but we just went before the dogs singing, "Ain't gonna let nobody turn me around." Bull Connor next would say, "Turn the fire hoses on." And as I said to you the other night, Bull Connor didn't know history. He knew a kind of physics that somehow didn't relate to the transphysics that we knew about. And that was the fact that there was a certain kind of fire that no water could put out. . . . And we just went on before the dogs and we would look at them; and we'd go on before the water hoses and we would look at it, and we'd just go on singing "Over my head I see freedom in the air."¹⁷

Flight and the fire next time: King's final speech was a spirited statement about the need for the continued poise and creativity of Civil Rights activists to counter the prevailing "social science" of white supremacy. His emphasis on flight, too, hinted at the U.S. government's contemporaneous preoccupation with science and eminence via the space race during the 1950s and 1960s, while freedom and equality on the ground remained elusive for African Americans. This era saw the U.S. government employ



23. Teapot, 1843–57. Ceramic. New York City Archaeological Repository (CV-080: 57, 51, 53)

the same language of conquest and expansion that had informed earlier battles over land and the myriad ways in which it had dispossessed Indigenous people and African Americans throughout the nation's history.

The writer Amiri Baraka once asked, “What are the Black purposes of space travel,” not with the intention of dismissing science or the idea of people of African descent building new worlds, but as a compelling prompt for devising a politics for living rather than using frontier logic that encroached upon other people's lives and property.¹⁸ The avant-garde jazz composer and experimental artist Sun Ra, who is often viewed as the artist whose works first offered a sustained Afrofuturist vision, indirectly offered visionary answers to Baraka's query. Sun Ra was born Herman Poole Blount in 1914 and raised in



24. Old Dr. Townsend's Sarsaparilla bottle fragments, 1839–70.
 Mold-blown glass. New York City Archaeological Repository
 (GV-522: 181, 204, 207)

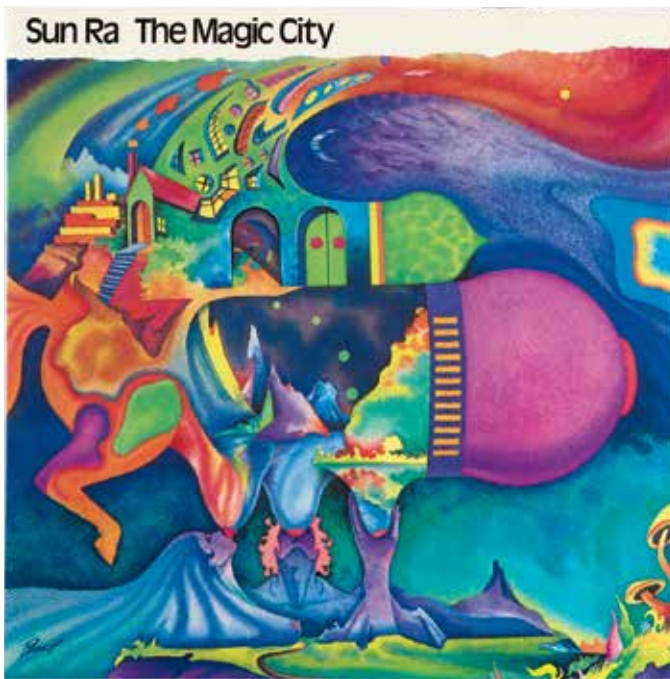


Birmingham, Alabama, where he often observed African Americans contending with vicious strains of white-supremacist violence that imperiled their livelihoods. These struggles no doubt left an indelible mark on the young Blount and made evident his place in the nation as a Black person. By the 1940s, Blount had taken on the persona of Sun Ra, sharing an origin story in which he referred to himself as an alien from Saturn. Sun Ra began to imagine new worlds in his Afrocentric visual productions, which featured elaborate costuming and unique uses of technology and sound in their performances of futuristic scenes. Sun Ra's song and poetry lyrics enabled him and his band (The Arkestra) to craft a universal message steeped in Africanist themes regarding collective liberation (fig. 25). In his view, appropriate Black uses of space travel would not be about domination or mere escapism but building better tomorrows. As encapsulated in Sun Ra's poem "The Far Off Place," such imaginings are the perfect embarkation points from which to take flight:

*In some far off place
Many light years in Space
I'll wait for you
Where human feet have never trod
Where human eyes have never seen
I'll build a world of abstract dreams
And wait for you.*

*In tomorrow's realm
We'lll [sic] take the helm of new ships
Then like the lash of a whip
We'll start on our way
And safely journey to another world
Another world — another world's world.¹⁹*

In the post-Civil Rights era, activists, revolutionaries, and artists went on to imagine and implement a series of speculative projects that challenged the social order, "renarrativized" history, and imagined new worlds and alternative existences.



25. Sun Ra and His Arkestra, *The Magic City*, 1966 (Gatefold Edition LP reissued 2017)

Coda

Before Yesterday We Could Fly: An Afrofuturist Period Room, then, is a fiction of authenticity; it is a speculative production of a domestic space that presents a historical counternarrative while also raising questions about time, space, and place. Through the lens of Afrofuturism, the period room brings together a range of African and African diasporic visual art and sound to reclaim, without temporal restrictions, what had once been an intentionally buried history. The past/present/future vision of this domestic space is guided by the speculative query of what might have happened if Seneca Village was never destroyed. As anthropologist Michel-Rolph Trouillot so aptly explained about time, “The past does not exist independently from the present. Indeed, the past is only past because there is a present, just as I can point to something *over there* only because I am *here*. But nothing is inherently over there or here. In that sense, the past has no content. The past — or, more accurately, pastness — is a position. Thus, in no way can we identify the past *as past*.”²⁰ All temporalities exist in relation to one another. The interventions in this new Afrofuturist period room are thus manifold, but they begin with the centering of Black life and the arts and cultures of African-descended peoples in The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

1. Ship names drawn from actual slave-ship records that cover this date as transcribed in “Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade — Database,” in *Slave Voyages* (Houston: The Slave Voyages Consortium; Rice University, 2021), accessed August 3, 2021; <https://www.slavevoyages.org/voyage/database>. 2. “The Dolben’s Act of 1788 [Government Document],” partially transcribed as item 146 in *Children and Youth in History* (Fairfax, Va.: The Roy Rosenzweig Center for History and New Media, George Mason University, 2010), accessed July 17, 2021; <https://chnm.gmu.edu/cyh/items/show/146>. 3. Written in 1751 and circulated in manuscript; first published as Benjamin Franklin, “Observations Concerning the Increase of Mankind, Peopling of Countries, &c.,” addendum to William Clarke, *Observations on the Late and Present Conduct of the French . . .* (Boston: Printed and sold by S. Kneeland, 1755), pp. 53–54. 4. Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey along the Atlantic Slave Route* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007), p. 6. 5. *Dictionary.com*, s.v. “speculate (v.),” accessed July 22,

2021; <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/speculate>. **6.** Virginia Hamilton, *The People Could Fly: American Black Folktales* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1985), p. 171. **7.** Edward E. Baptist, *The Half Has Never Been Told: Slavery and the Making of American Capitalism* (New York: Basic Books, 2014), p. 188. **8.** Savannah Unit, Georgia Writers' Project, Works Progress Administration, *Drums and Shadows: Survival Studies among the Georgia Coastal Negroes* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1940), p. 154. The transcriptions provided by white American interviewers under the Works Progress Administration often use purported dialect from their African American informants. Because these transcriptions are uneven and have the potential to reify harmful stereotypes about African American intellect, particularly that of those from the U.S. South, I have elected to include the quotation here in addition to the alternate text for clarity purposes. **9.** Michelle D. Commander, *Afro-Atlantic Flight: Speculative Returns and the Black Fantastic* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2017), p. 6. **10.** David Ruggles in "Living Conditions and Race Relations in the North," in *The Black Worker: A Documentary History from Colonial Times to the Present*, vol. 1, *The Black Worker to 1869*, edited by Philip S. Foner and Ronald L. Lewis (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1978), p. 181. The original article was published as "Kidnapping in the City of New York," in *The Liberator* on August 6, 1836. **11.** "The Present Look of Our Great Central Park. Tired of Life," *The New-York Daily Times*, July 9, 1856, p. 2. **12.** J. F. Richmond, *New York and Its Institutions, 1609–1873: The Bright Side of New York* (New York: E. B. Treat, 1873), p. 163. **13.** This quote is from Toni Morrison's 1988 Melcher Book Award acceptance speech, which was reprinted in full along with an audience Q&A at Toni Morrison, "A Bench by the Road [October 12, 1988]," *UU World* (Boston, 2008), accessed August 5, 2021; www.uuworld.org/articles/a-bench-by-road. **14.** Samuel R. Delany, "The Necessity of Tomorrow(s)," in *Starboard Wine: More Notes on the Language of Science Fiction*, rev. ed. (1984; Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 2012), p. 14. **15.** Mark Dery, "Black to the Future: Interviews with Samuel R. Delany, Greg Tate, and Tricia Rose," in *Flame Wars: The Discourse of Cyberculture*, edited by Mark Dery (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1994), p. 180. **16.** Kodwo Eshun, "Further Considerations on Afrofuturism," *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3, no. 2 (Summer 2003), pp. 298–99. **17.** Martin Luther King, Jr., "I've Been to the Mountaintop," speech, Mason Temple, Tenn., April 3, 1968. In *American Rhetoric*, accessed August 22, 2021; <https://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/mlkivebeentothemountaintop.htm>. **18.** Imamu Amiri Baraka, *Kawaida Studies: The New Nationalism* (Chicago: Third World Press, 1972), p. 31. **19.** Sun Ra, "The Far Off Place," in *Sun Ra: The Immeasurable Equation; The Collected Poetry and Prose*, edited by James L. Wolf and Hartmut Geerken (Norderstedt, Germany: Books on Demand, 2005), p. 164. **20.** Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), p. 15.

PROTOCOL AND RESPONSE



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OUR STORY THUS FAR,
WE JOIN OUR INTREPID
TIME TRAVELER AFTER
THEIR FIGHT AGAINST
THE EVIL ALBINOGG, THE
SNOW WHITE LORD.

WITH THE AID OF THE POWERFUL
CULTURAL SPIRIT MOTHER
PATCHWERK, OUR TRAVELER IS
NOW HEADING HOME WITH THE
VULCANIZED RUBBER COMB!

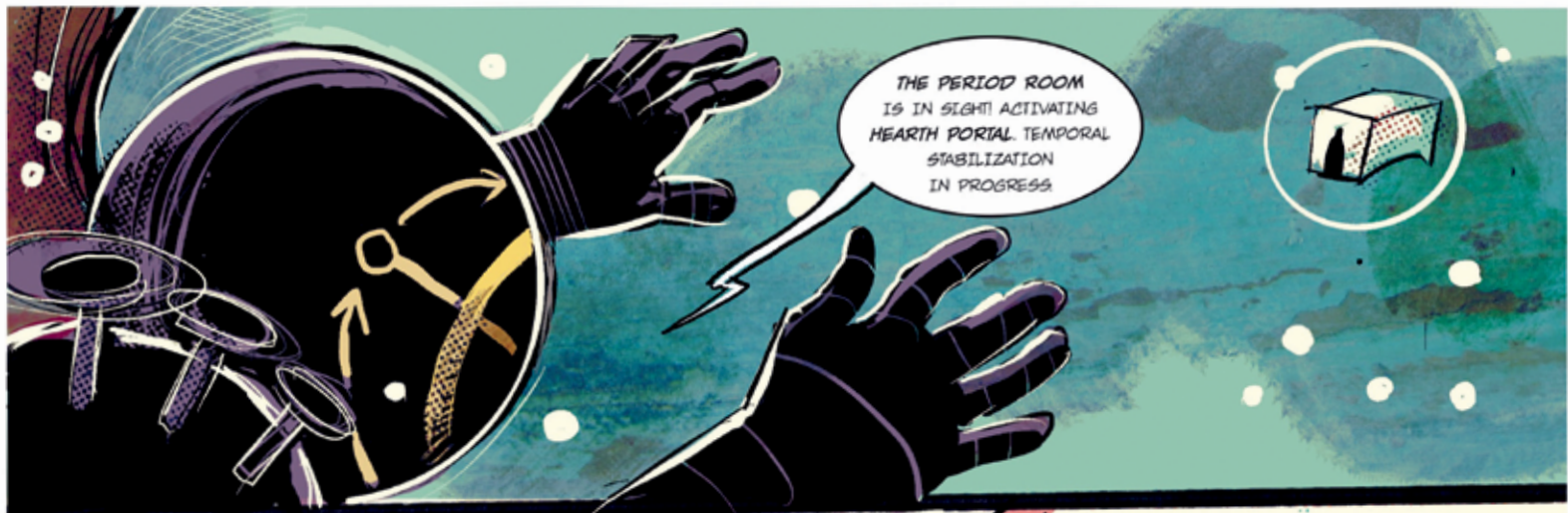
BUT, THAT WAS HUNDREDS
OF YEARS AGO!

THEIR BLACK FUNKENTELECHY
SUIT ALLOWS THEM TO GLIDE
EFFORTLESSLY THROUGH THE
VEIL, A DARK CONNECTIVE
SKEIN THAT BINDS ALL TIME,
DIMENSIONS, AND SPACE.

THE LAST ANGEL'S WINGS
UNFURL AND USE THE RHYTHMS
OF THE SPACEWAYS TO
HURL THE TRAVELER THROUGH
THE ASTROBLACK UNTIL...

THERE!
THANK THE
ANCESTORS...





THE PERIOD ROOM
IS IN SIGHT! ACTIVATING
HEARTH PORTAL TEMPORAL
STABILIZATION
IN PROGRESS



THE TRAVELER PHASES THROUGH
THE ANCESTRAL HEARTH
INTO A ROOM, A ROOM THAT
SHOULDN'T EXIST. LIKE
BLACKNESS ITSELF

THIS SPACE,
THIS VESSEL,
EXISTS OUT-
SIDE OF ANY
KNOWN REAL-
ITY. IT'S JUST
A CIPHER, A
SHADOW OF
A NOTION.

THE TRAVELER'S MOLECULES
ARE DISPERSED AND
REINTEGRATED INTO
WHAT PASSES FOR A BODY
IN THIS LIFE.

I MADE IT BACK!
SO MANY YEARS HAVE
PASSED, BUT MY
TIMEPIECE SAYS IT
WAS ONLY AN HOUR!



OH...WAIT! I CAN FEEL
THE EFFECTS OF THE
TIME DISTORTION!

THE
TRAVELER IS
SURPRISED
AT HOW SOON
THE TIME
DISTORTION
EFFECT HAS
BEGUN THIS
TIME.



ROOM, ACTIVATE
NISE PROTOCOL. ACCESS
CODE: 7779311!

I CAN ALREADY
FEEL MY MEMORY...
FADING...

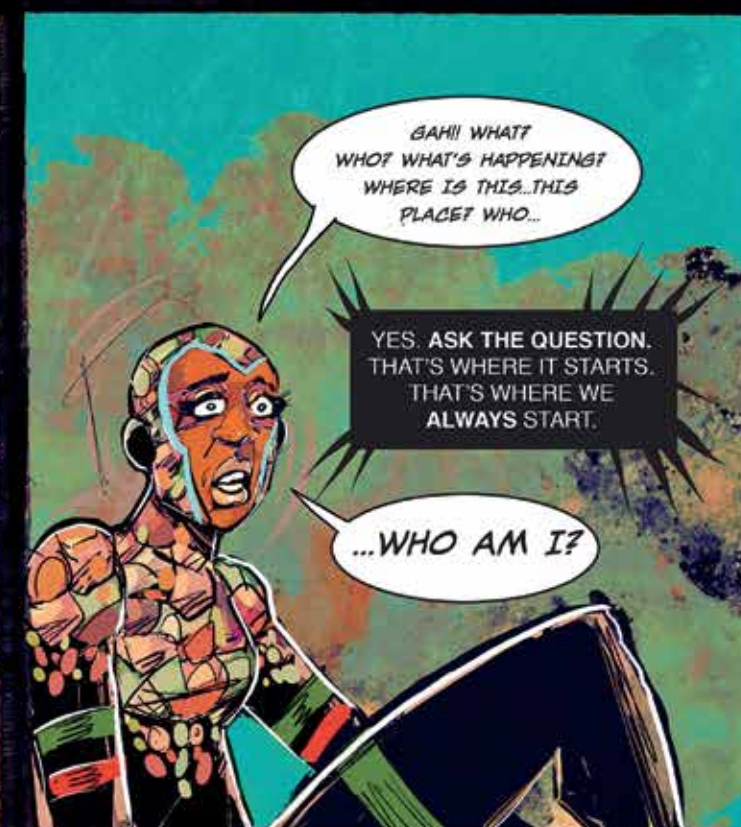
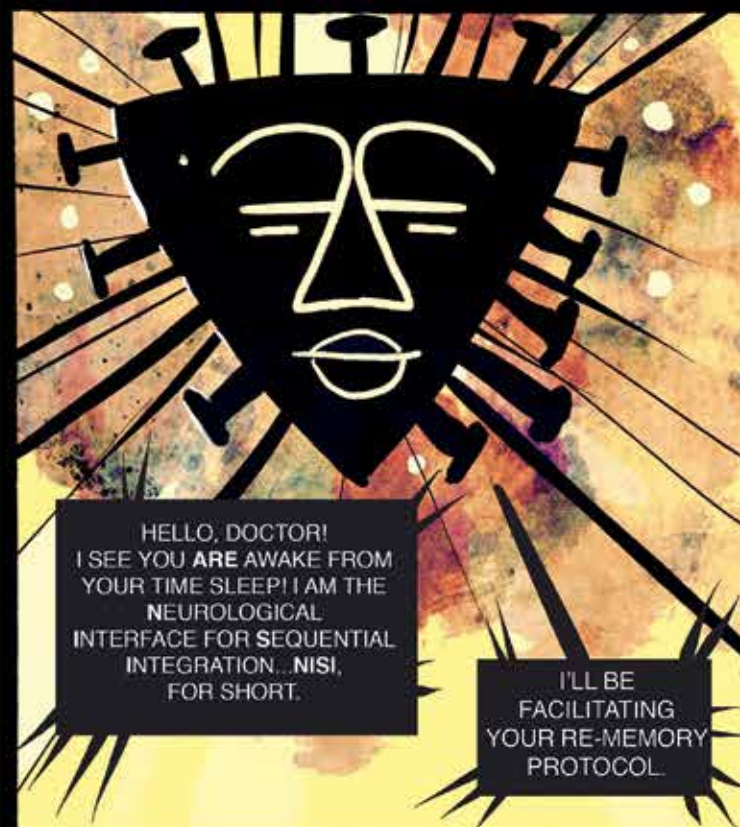
THE TRAVELLER
ACTIVATES A
FAIL SAFE...
EVEN AS THEY
FALL INTO A
DREAMLESS
SLEEP
BECAUSE
OF THE TIME
DILATION.




THE TRAVELER FALLS
UNCONSCIOUS, THEIR
MEMORIES EATEN AWAY BY
THE VERY ACTION OF
TIME TRAVEL.

WATCH NOW AS THEY
ENCOUNTER THE STRANGE-
NESS OF THEMSELVES AND
THE ODDNESS OF A
BLACKNESS THAT
NEVER WAS IN
A STORY CALLED

PROTOCOL AND RESPONSE





YOU ARE A
SURVIVOR.
A COLLECTOR.
A SEEKER. YOU ARE
A DESCENDANT OF
PEOPLE WHO
NEVER WERE.
PEOPLE WHO
SHOULD HAVE
BEEN BUT WERE
DISRUPTED BY A
SYSTEM **BEYOND**
THEIR CONTROL.

I AM? WHERE
ARE THEY NOW?

THEY ARE TEARS IN
RAIN. **REMNANTS**
OF THEM ARE
IN THE
OBJECTS IN THIS
ROOM. THIS
VESSEL HURTTLES
BETWEEN THE
HERE, THE NOW,
AND THE NEVER.
A **PERIOD ROOM**
THAT ACTUALLY IS
AN **ELLIPSIS**...A
UTOPIA OF A KIND.

THIS IS WHAT IT'S
LIKE TO NOT
UNDERSTAND
YOUR PAST, YOUR
HISTORY. A
FUTURE CAN
NOT TAKE ROOT
WITHOUT A FOCUS
ON THE
PAST. ALL IS
CONNECTED.
YOU'VE SAID THIS
MANY TIMES.

NONE OF THIS
MAKES ANY SENSE! I FEEL
SO LOST. SO EMPTY...
LIKE A **BROKEN POT.**

I I...HAVE?
WHY DON'T
I REMEMBER?

I FEEL LIKE
I'M FALLING
APART BIT
BY BIT.

BECAUSE TIME
TRAVEL **ISN'T**
POSSIBLE.
BECAUSE THE
TRAUMA
OF MOVING
BETWEEN
DIMENSIONS IS
TOO GREAT TO
ENDURE. SO,
THE MIND
PROTECTS ITSELF
BY **DELETING** THE
EXPERIENCE.

BUT WE'RE ABOUT
TO FIX THAT!

SIGNIFYING
OBJECT
PROGRAM...
COMMENCE!

DOCTOR! HEY THERE!
REMEMBER HOW
YOU PICKED ME UP?
IT MUST HAVE BEEN
LIKE 2007! WILLIE
CALLED ME "SHINE"
BUT YOU CALLED ME
NECESSARY, AND I
LOVED YOU FOR IT. SO,
I CAME HERE TO THIS
IMPOSSIBLE ROOM
WITH YOU!



DOCTOR!
PLEASE REMEMBER
ME! I'M A MIDO CHAIR
BY JOMO TARIKU.
YOU SAID I WAS
PERFECT! HOW CAN
YOU FORGET ME?



GREETINGS, DOCTOR!
I AM FROM SOUTH
AFRICA! MY CREATOR
ANDILE DYALVANE
CALLED ME
"UMWONYO"! WE'VE
SHARED SO MANY
STORIES!



HEY, DOC! I'M A
MORTAR AND PESTLE!
MY BRASS BODY HAS
MADE SO MANY
REMEDIES FOR YOU
TO HEAL YOUR BODY
AFTER ROUGH ADVENT-
URES! I'M HERE
IF YOU
NEED ME.




DOCTOR! YOU JUST
FOUGHT AN ANCIENT
MONSTER TO FIND ME!
YOU AND
MOTHER PATCHWERK
SAVED ME FROM HIM!
I AM A MIRACLE,
MADE OF INDIA
RUBBER AND SULFUR
AND READY TO
MANAGE ANY
QUEEN'S COIF!



WILLIAM HENRY JOHNSON
PAINTED US AND YOU LOVED
US AND PUT US HERE TO RE-
MIND YOU OF A PLACE THAT
WAS! HE CALLED US "THREE
CHILDREN." YOU GAVE US A
DIFFERENT PURPOSE
BY BRINGING US HERE.






ENOUGH! IT'S NOT WORKING! I MEAN...HOW IS ANY OF THIS EVEN POSSIBLE!? ARE THESE EVEN MY HANDS?


WHY OF COURSE THEY ARE. THEY HELPED MAKE THIS SPACE.

THEY GUIDE THIS SHIP THROUGH THE ASTROBLACK!

BUT...HOW DO YOU KNOW?



WHO HAVE THESE HANDS TOUCHED? ARE THEY KIND HANDS? ARE THEY FIERCE AND UNCARING?



WHAT HAS THIS BODY DONE? THESE ARMS? WHAT HAVE THEY HAD TO GIVE UP? WHAT SONGS HAVE THESE EARS HATED?



MY GODS! WHAT IF I NEVER GET ANYTHING BACK? I DON'T EVEN REMEMBER ANYONE WHO'S BROKEN MY HEART!

THAT'S... THAT'S SO SAD.

ANCESTOR APP. ACTIVATE.



UNLEASH THE
NKISI! UNLEASH
THE SHADOW
SOULS!

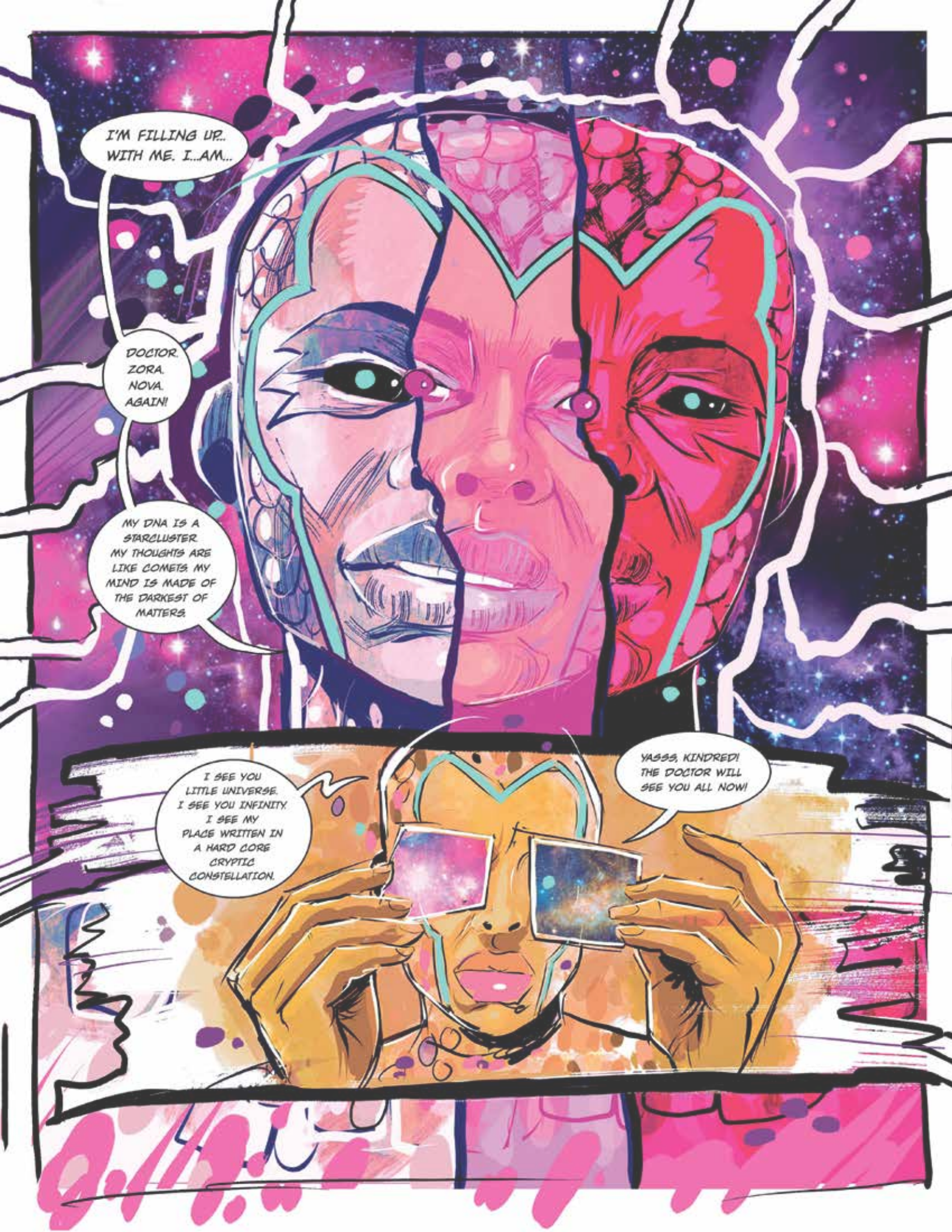
I SEE YOU! THEY SEE
YOU! NOW, CHILD,
SEE YOURSELF! SEE
YOURSELF THROUGH
THE VEIL. OPEN
YOURSELF!

YES! HER
SYNAPSES ARE
FIRING UP!
I CAN SENSE THE
MEMORIES
RETURNING!

YES! I CAN TOO!
HOW COULD I HAVE
FORGOTTEN! MY MOTHER'S
FACE RETURNS TO ME.

MY FATHER'S LAUGH.
I CAN HEAR IT. I CAN SEE
ALL MY FOREMOTHERS AND
FOREFATHERS!

I CAN FEEL
EVERYTHING! SEE
EVERYTHING!
I'M FILLING UP!



I'M FILLING UP...
WITH ME. I...AM...

DOCTOR
ZORA
NOVA
AGAIN!

MY DNA IS A
STARCLUSTER
MY THOUGHTS ARE
LIKE COMETS MY
MIND IS MADE OF
THE DARKEST OF
MATTERS

I SEE YOU
LITTLE UNIVERSE.
I SEE YOU INFINITY.
I SEE MY
PLACE WRITTEN IN
A HARD CORE
CRYPTIC
CONSTELLATION.

YASSS, KINDRED!
THE DOCTOR WILL
SEE YOU ALL NOW!

NISI,
THANK
YOU!

I AM HERE TO
SERVE, DOCTOR.

CAN I GET A
HOLO-SHEET OF
OUR NEXT DESTINATION?
WE HAVE MUCH TO SEE.
MUCH TO RECLAIM!

AS YOU WISH,
DOCTOR NOVA.

NISI, ARE THESE
COORDINATES
CORRECT?

THERE'S NO NEED
FOR INSULTS,
DOCTOR.

QUITE RIGHT.
QUITE RIGHT.

MEGASCOPIC
GOBBLES
ENGAGE.

AH. BETTER!
COMMENCE
LANDING
PROCEDURES.

TRANSDIMENSIONAL
BRAKES ARE DEPLOYED
HELLO, METI!

THIS NEVER-CHILD
OF SENECA VILLAGE
HAS MADE IT HOME...
IN THE END

