

ENGINEERING

A NEW WORLD ORDER



AN AFROFUTURIST'S CRITIQUE OF THE CONTEMPORARY DIVIDE

ALYSE STONE
CONTEMPORARY ART - CRITICAL PRACTICE
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Black Alchemy, Archival, Technology, Artificial Intelligence, Virtual Reality, Socio-political, Black
Women, Contemporary Revolution, Decolonization, Globalization

Dedicated to my parents and family, who boldly dreamed that their little girl could defy all spaces and time.

Thank you to my tutors, editor, family, and friends. Their time, encouragement, and support made this expedition so much more.

ABSTRACT

The goal of this dissertation is to use the discussion of three themed verticals to present a disquisition: Can researched storytelling through art and inclusive technological innovations present an opportunity for a more democratic and politically stable future?

The three themed verticals in this paper are:

Archival Research

Sci-Fi World Building (Afrofuturism)

Emerging technological advancements (mainly AI and VR) and their role in pushing humanity forward

The above themes are contextualized within the scope of my visual art practice and contemporary socio-politics.

How can ignoring blind spots in datasets cause more harm in our world?

If we think of institutions and their archives as datasets, how has the current architecture of these systems left a margin for error, causing harm to the general population?

How can technologists and institutions course-correct for a more equitable path forward?

Separately, what do humans and engineers do when the technology we've built is quickly outpacing us? We must evolve and grow with it, otherwise it will cause disruption to our society. The current political unrest in the United States was accelerated by technology.

Emerging technologies, such as artificial intelligence, are highly likely to accelerate our society faster than when the iPhone reached the peak of its curve of innovation. There are multiple ways in which AI could become a force for good and in which 'Black Alchemy' can become one of the ways to escape from the current reality. Both become important tools to in humanity's progress as we continue to innovate, create, and exchange groundbreaking ideas.

PART ONE

CONTEMPORARY
TECHNOLOGICAL/
ANTHROPOLOGIES

“We must make every effort [to ensure] that the past injustice, violence and economic discrimination will be made known to the people: The taboo, “let’s not talk about it” must be broken.”

- Albert Einstein

CHAPTER: (TWO): DISTORTED (VIRTUAL)REALITIES: THE PROBLEM

Present Day

In 1965, James Baldwin gave a poignant speech at Cambridge University on the topic 'Has the American Dream been achieved at the Expense of the Negro?'²⁶ Baldwin was there that day to debate with William F. Buckley, a conservative and self-proclaimed libertarian, who did not support racial violence and segregation, but did not believe in structural racism and placed the blame for the lack of Black economic growth in the 1960s on Black Americans.²⁷ The debate was highly publicised and James Baldwin succeeded in the debate, walking away the unanimous winner.



Figure 2: Jane Evelyn Atwood, James Baldwin with the bust of his head by American artist, Lawrence Wolhandler in his hotel room, rue des Grands Augustins, Paris, France (1975), © Jane Evelyn Atwood. Courtesy David Zwirner²⁸

²⁶ *Has the American Dream Been Achieved at the Expense of the American Negro*, 2013
<<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VOCZOHQ7fCE>> [accessed 13 January 2022]

²⁷ Meaney, Thomas, 'When James Baldwin Squared Off Against William F. Buckley Jr.', *The New York Times*, 18 October 2019, section Books <<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/18/books/review/the-fire-is-upon-us-nicholas-buccola.html>> [accessed 18 April 2022]

²⁸ Dazed, 'God Made My Face: A Collective Portrait of James Baldwin', *Dazed*
<<https://www.dazeddigital.com/art-photography/gallery/26114/1/god-made-my-face-a-collective-portrait-of-james-baldwin>> [accessed 20 July 2022]
<https://www.dazeddigital.com/art-photography/gallery/26114/1/god-made-my-face-a-collective-portrait-of-james-baldwin>.

Baldwin started his rebuttal to Buckley by posing an anecdote about distorted realities, or, as Baldwin put it, ‘my quarrel has to do with one’s sense, one’s system of reality’. He continued by responding directly to the debate motion, ‘[...] one’s reaction/response to that question has to depend in effect on where you find yourself in the world. What your sense of reality is. What your system of reality is. That is, it depends on assumptions which we hold so deeply as to be scarcely aware of them’.²⁹

Baldwin’s rebuttal provides us with a moment of historical futurism. Historical futurism describes an earlier moment in history that foreshadows the present and subsequent futures. Fifty-six years later, Isabel Wilkerson articulated this distorted reality phenomenon in her book *Caste*, as a current plague of our time. She writes ‘The distorting lens of caste can cloud the senses, making the dominant group willing to deprive itself of the benefit of talent outside its ranks, allow the gifts of those from groups deemed inferior to languish [...] to keep the castes separate or to uphold the fiction that all talent resides within one favored group’.³⁰ Historical futurism becomes a data point that is present in the current physical reality.

Galvan Debarba and a team from Switzerland and Israel published a paper in *Computer & Graphics* in 2018: they speculated on the user experience and the viability of distorted movements and perception in virtual reality as they studied participants’ tendency to self-attribute the movements of their avatar.³² Self-attribution in the context of the experiment was ‘the state where users [...] acquire the perception that they have complete control over the moments of a virtual hand’ when the user in fact does not have control. The research team stated: ‘Human perception is not a perfect capture of reality, and much of the information we experience as being collected from the external world is the product of brain inference’.³¹

While the disconnect between physical reality and the physiological limits of an individual is what makes virtual reality experiences so compelling and emotive, it illustrates a specific particularity of the human condition. If our subconscious brain is informed by incorrect or deceptive data points, the output of the human perception will be further disoriented. In their study, the team reported that ‘subjects performed poorly in detecting discrepancies when the nature of the distortion is not made explicit and the subjects are biased to self-attributing distorted movements that make the task easier’.³²

²⁹ *Has the American Dream Been Achieved at the Expense of the American Negro*, 2013
<<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VOCZOHQ7fCE>> [accessed 13 January 2022]

³⁰ Wilkerson, Isabel, *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents* (Random House, 2020)

³¹ Galvan Debarba, Henrique, Ronan Boulic, Roy Salomon, Olaf Blanke, and Bruno Herbelin, ‘Self-Attribution of Distorted Reaching Movements in Immersive Virtual Reality’, *Computers & Graphics*, 76 (2018), 142–52
<<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cag.2018.09.001>>

³² Galvan Debarba, Henrique, Ronan Boulic, Roy Salomon, Olaf Blanke, and Bruno Herbelin, ‘Self-Attribution of Distorted Reaching Movements in Immersive Virtual Reality’, *Computers & Graphics*, 76 (2018), 142–52
<<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cag.2018.09.001>>

CHAPTER: (FOUR): BLACK ALCHEMY: THE POWER OF ESCAPE AND THE ARCHIVE
Present Day

Contemporary multidisciplinary American artist Rashid Johnson was interviewed by Art21 about his invented secret society, *The New Negro Escapist Social and Athletic Club*. The works Johnson creates harness the variation of his artistic practice as well as weave a Black Escapism narrative. Johnson stated, “A lot of the work I grew up seeing by Black artists depicted a problem. I wanted to make something that didn’t necessarily speak to a problem. So, I developed a group”.⁵¹ Figure 15 is an image from the installations. Within some of the works, Johnson depicts himself as a reimagined character. All works have an alluring duality of another realm.



Figure 15: Rashid Johnson, Phillips, *The New Negro Escapist Social and Athletic Club (Emmett) Lambda print, in artist’s frame, found object, steel, cinder blocks and wax, in 4 parts photograph 48 x 74 in. (121.9 x 188 cm.) sculpture 55 x 12 x 21 in. (139.7 x 30.5 x 53.3 cm.), 2008*⁵²

⁵¹ ‘Rashid Johnson Makes Things to Put Things On’, *Art21*
<<https://art21.org/watch/new-york-close-up/rashid-johnson-makes-things-to-put-things-on/>> [accessed 20 July 2022]

⁵² ‘Rashid Johnson - New Now New York Lot 194 September 2017’, *Phillips*
<<https://www.phillips.com/detail/rashid-johnson/NY010617/194>> [accessed 20 July 2022]



Figure 16: Rashid Johnson, Monique Meloche Gallery, *Self Portrait as the Professor of Astronomy, Miscegenation, and Critical Theory at "The New Negro Escapist Social and Athletic Club" Center for Graduate Studies*, 2009 ⁵³

Similarly, the Black Alchemical universe that will unfold in Book Two is an amalgamation of archival research, serendipity, and a scholarly and artistic agency to escape. As stated in the notes on methodology, I started this project almost three years ago, in 2019. At the beginning of this inquisition, I was looking into the archives to uncover the hundred year history of Black Women in STEM. That research expedition quickly expanded to the 100 year history of Black Women across America, to later become the *thousand* year history of Black Women, which is where the project stands today. Then in 2020, the Black Lives Matter movement protests erupted around the United States, as well as all over the world.⁵⁴ My co-Founder, Dolly Singh, a Founder/CEO and tech executive, decided to mobilize our powerhouse female friends in Los Angeles to create THE ART OF MAKING NOISE.⁵⁵ The event took place on Venice Beach and was centered around two collaborative murals, a white paper, and social media campaign. Each “powerhouse friend” was responsible for a story of a Black person that had been lynched the past 100 years.⁵⁶ The

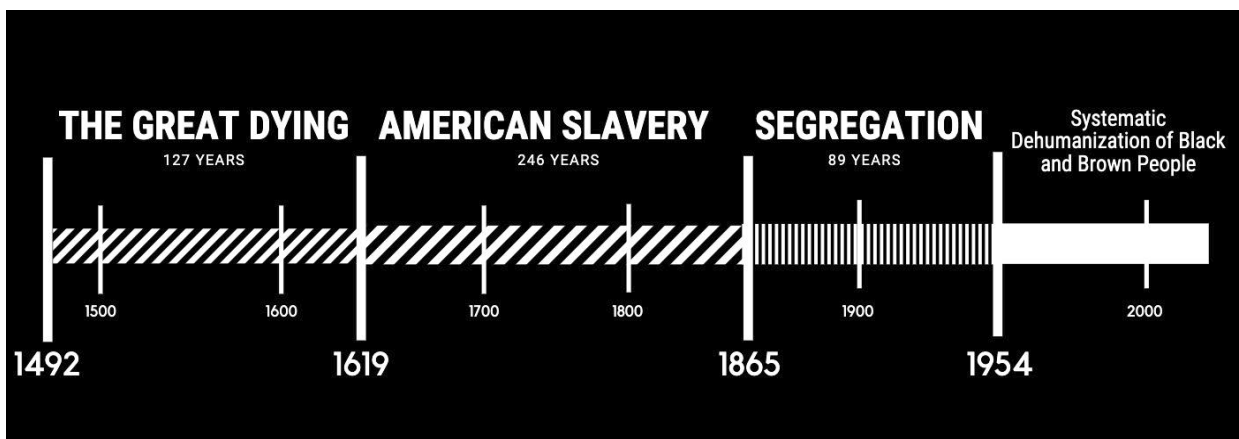
⁵³ ‘Rashid Johnson, Self Portrait as the Professor of Astronomy, Miscegenation, and Critical Theory at “The New Negro Escapist Social and Athletic Club” Center for Graduate Studies, 2009’, *Moniquemeloche* <<https://www.moniquemeloche.com/artists/42-rashid-johnson/works/15850-rashid-johnson-self-portrait-as-the-professor-of-astronomy-miscegenation-2009/>> [accessed 20 July 2022]

⁵⁴ Gottbrath, Laurin-Whitney, ‘In 2020, the Black Lives Matter Movement Shook the World’ <<https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2020/12/31/2020-the-year-black-lives-matter-shook-the-world>> [accessed 20 July 2022]

⁵⁵ ‘#THEARTOFMAKINGNOISE to Bring Two Murals to Venice in Name of Racial Justice – Santa Monica Daily Press’ <<https://www.smdp.com/theartofmakingnoise-to-bring-two-murals-to-venice-in-name-of-racial-justice/193970>> [accessed 20 July 2022]

⁵⁶ ‘THE ART OF MAKING NOISE. - Splash’ <<https://artofmakingnoise.splashthat.com>> [accessed 20 July 2022]

below are infographics from the white paper.⁵⁷⁵⁸ For the whitepaper, I had the opportunity to interview Dr. Yvette Richards Jordan PhD, an Associate Professor of George Mason University.⁵⁹ In our two hour interview, she shared findings from her decades career doing this work, as well as stories of her driving to borderline states to access forgotten archives. The story of her driving hours to interview a dying elder of the Black community, in order to document and record the oral tradition of passing down the witness testimony of a lynching that was never spoken of, is a moment that changed my artistic practice. Many in the Black academic community have been doing this work for decades, at times preserving through a family archive system, without the infrastructure afforded to their white counterparts as evidenced by the displacement of Black educators post desegregation following *Brown v. Board*.⁶⁰ ⁶¹



⁵⁷ 'Data and Education #THEARTOFMAKINGNOISE.Pdf', *Dropbox* <<https://www.dropbox.com/s/u7929tqlhza51bi/Data%20and%20Education%20%23THEARTOFMAKINGNOISE.pdf?dl=0>> [accessed 20 July 2022]

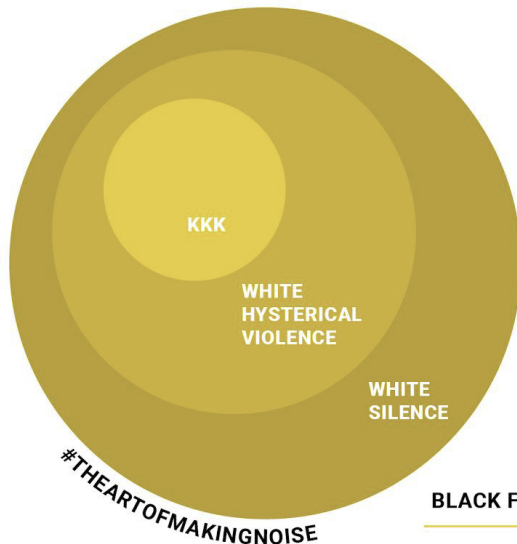
⁵⁸ 'White Paper #THEARTOFMAKINGNOISE.Pdf', *Dropbox* <<https://www.dropbox.com/s/fkc5x8sov4krivu/White%20Paper%20%23THEARTOFMAKINGNOISE.pdf?dl=0>> [accessed 20 July 2022]

⁵⁹ 'History and Art History | Faculty and Staff: Yvette Richards Jordan', *History and Art History* <<https://historyarthistory.gmu.edu/people/yjordan>> [accessed 20 July 2022]

⁶⁰ Lutz, Mallory, 'The Hidden Cost of Brown v. Board: African American Educators' Resistance to Desegregating Schools', *Online Journal of Rural Research & Policy*, 12.4 (2017) <<https://doi.org/10.4148/1936-0487.1085>>

⁶¹ Fultz, Michael, 'The Displacement of Black Educators Post-Brown: An Overview and Analysis', *History of Education Quarterly*, 44.1 (2004), 11–45 <<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1748-5959.2004.tb00144.x>>

WHITE TERROR MATRIX



KKK: Ku Klux Klan, is a group of white supremacist hate organizations based in the U.S. that use terror tactics to push their agenda. "One group was founded immediately after the Civil War and lasted until the 1870s. The other began in 1915 and has continued to the present" (www.britannica.com/topic/Ku-Klux-Klan).

WHITE HYSTERICAL VIOLENCE: Hysterical and theatrical behavior used by White people to push a racist narrative and otherwise justify violence in the name of fear instead of citing their own white supremacist behavior. (Jan Voogd, *Race Riots & Resistance: The Red Summer of 1919*).

WHITE SILENCE: The resistance or silence of White people in the face of topics that may peak their discomfort. This particularity refers to discussions revolving around race, when individual White people "experience negative emotions including guilt and anger" which then results in silence and a resistance to addressing the topics altogether (Marianne DiMascio, *The Deafening Silence of Whites*).

Figure 17, 18: Infographics from THEARTOFMAKINGNOISE white paper, and data + education paper, a collaborative project published in July 2020 online. Alyse Stone, Co-Founder Dolly Singh, and assistant Sophia Collins. Monika Sharma produced graphic design elements.

As I continued to spend time with the archives, I grew frustrated. Where I could sometimes locate an image or a visual, I found only incomplete data and records that were disproportionate to Western-European archival records. Information in some of the databases had erroneous metatags, rooted in deantiquated vocabulary.⁶² Sadiya Hartman so perfectly encapsulated this moment in an interview: "I work a lot with scraps of the archive. I work a lot with unknown persons, nameless figures, ensembles, collectives, multitudes, and the chorus. That's where my imagination of practice resides. That's where my heart resides".⁶³ The gaps in the archives and the stories I was uncovering quickly became a source of gold in my soon-to-become Black Alchemical universe. I teleported with each woman's stories, or lack thereof, coloring the gaps in the data with other histories, archives, visuals, and periodicals. This search brought me to meet, Selika Laszewski, the main character in my autotheoretical Black Alchemical universe, as seen in Figure 19. I found Selika by chance, serendipity becoming a form of method by which my three year research expedition transformed and became a moment in the fabrics of time where the story was being imagined. I was enveloped in so much more: more for my visual practice, for the preservation of the archive, and for the agency of Black escapism.

⁶² Chilcott, Alicia, 'Towards Protocols for Describing Racially Offensive Language in UK Public Archives', *Archival Science*, 19.4 (2019), 359–76 <<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10502-019-09314-y>>

⁶³ 'Sadiya Hartman on Working with Archives' <<https://thecreativeindependent.com/people/sadiya-hartman-on-working-with-archives/>> [accessed 20 July 2022]



Figure 19: Portrait of Mademoiselle Selika Laszewski, Photo by Paul Nadar, Paris, France (1891). Archive: Ministry of Culture (France), Heritage and Photography Media Library, RMN-GP distribution ⁶⁴

Not much is known about Selika Laszewski. There is speculation that Selika is actually her alias name. Her birthplace, origin story, and real surname are unknown. Selika was a celebrity equestrian rider during the Belle Époque period in Paris, which lasted from 1871 - 1914.⁶⁵ In 1891, there were six portraits taken of Selika by Paul Nadar, the famous Parisian photographer, who was the son of Nadar and managed his father's studio in Rue d'Anjou.⁶⁶ Photography and sitting for portraits was such an important tool for those of the African diaspora during the turn-of-the-century to control the narrative around what it meant to be Black during that time period.⁶⁷ Photos like this are a rare gem for many reasons, but the context and historical currency of these portraits in the French Ministry of Culture archive make her story, the set, and her striking wardrobe and stance even more captivating. Discovering Selika's portrait and the story gave me the opportunity to escape further in my

⁶⁴ 'Mademoiselle Selika Laszewski, écuyère'

<https://www.pop.culture.gouv.fr/notice/memoire/APNADAR012322?base=%5B%22Photographies%20%28M%C3%A9moire%29%22%5D&mainSearch=%22selika%20%22&last_view=%22list%22&idQuery=%22ed1768c-1e35-6040-8d5-7168b5c452%22> [accessed 20 July 2022]

⁶⁵ Forrest, Susanna, 'Selika, Mystery of the Belle Epoque', *The Paris Review*, 2018

<<https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2018/02/09/selika-lost-mystery-belle-epoque/>> [accessed 20 July 2022]

⁶⁶ 'Paul Nadar (The J. Paul Getty Museum Collection)', *The J. Paul Getty Museum Collection*

<<https://www.getty.edu/art/collection/person/103KF3>> [accessed 20 July 2022]

⁶⁷ Magazine, Smithsonian, and Jane Recker, 'For Turn-of-the-Century African-Americans, the Camera Was a Tool for Empowerment', *Smithsonian Magazine*

<<https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smithsonian-institution/turn-of-century-african-americans-camera-tool-empowerment-180971757/>> [accessed 20 July 2022]

Black Alchemical universe. The alias became an intoxicating invitation to completely reimagine the work. Escapism was deployed as a tactic to teleport, time travel, reinvent, and create a time parallel universe in the future present tense where Selika exists free of the circumstances and histories that may have existed in her reality, and that may have resulted in her almost erasure from history.

To provision, this Black Alchemical expedition with Black Escapism is to create a new iteration of the history of escapism practices. There is historical precedence throughout and after American slavery of Black Americans trying to escape from the South to the North.^{68 69} The Great Migration North happened from 1910-1970.⁷⁰ Marcus Garvey in the early 1900s famously organized the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) and started a campaign for Black Americans to “escape” back to Africa.⁷¹ Sun Ra’s afrofuturistic paradise of Astro Black Mythology encouraged Black people to disregard present racial turbulence and head with Ra to Saturn.⁷² Then, in Paul Beatty’s 1996 novel, *The White Boy Shuffle*, Beatty presents a satirical proposition that Black people should kill themselves.⁷³ All modes of Black Escapism provide such a rich context the the world that Black Alchemy prescribes, but also the visual practice that informs the method. Reframing the narrative where a depleted dataset, the archive, becomes the playground for unlimited creativity to define modes of escape that rethink the past. The work lives and evolves in this present timeline. As Rashid Johnson categorically states during his Art21 interview, “it’s important... to live your own history. And if you are consistently burdened by a bigger history that may have affected your existence but is not your specific story, then you’re doing yourself a disservice.”⁷⁴ The art, technology, literature, and research currently created now by the people of the African Diaspora, gives us agency to live unalloyed in the future timelines.

⁶⁸ Editors, History com, ‘Underground Railroad’, *HISTORY* <<https://www.history.com/topics/black-history/underground-railroad>> [accessed 20 July 2022]

⁶⁹ ‘Rashid Johnson Makes Things to Put Things On’, *Art21* <<https://art21.org/watch/new-york-close-up/rashid-johnson-makes-things-to-put-things-on/>> [accessed 20 July 2022]

⁷⁰ ‘The Great Migration (1910-1970)’, *National Archives*, 2021 <<https://www.archives.gov/research/african-americans/migrations/great-migration>> [accessed 20 July 2022]

⁷¹ ‘AFAM 162 - Lecture 9 - The New Negroes | Open Yale Courses’ <<https://oyc.yale.edu/african-american-studies/afam-162/lecture-9>> [accessed 20 July 2022]

⁷² Editor, ‘Sun Ra: Myth, Science, and Science Fiction.’, 2015 <<https://journal.finfar.org/articles/sun-ra-myth-science-and-science-fiction/>> [accessed 20 July 2022]

⁷³ Beatty, Paul, *The White Boy Shuffle*, 1st Picador USA ed (New York: Picador, 2001)

⁷⁴ ‘Rashid Johnson Makes Things to Put Things On’, *Art21* <<https://art21.org/watch/new-york-close-up/rashid-johnson-makes-things-to-put-things-on/>> [accessed 20 July 2022]

CONCLUSION

A Final Word

The Black Alchemical quantum realm becomes a cypher code, aiding on a quest. This code unlocks a deeper understanding of the present, transforming our understanding of our current realities and enhancing the trajectory, knowledge, and consciousness of future timelines. I discovered and invented the Black Alchemical universe, that continues to grow and expand; a quantum realm of infinite data and potential, from a simple provocation. How did American society come to its current cultural dissonance?

Black Alchemy was created out of necessity, using bare bones. The ‘bricoleur’, from Claude Lévi-Strauss’s concept of ‘bricolage’, is defined as having “the skill of using whatever is at hand and recombining them to create something new”.⁸² The reality is that the archives and our histories that are readily accessible within institutions are incomplete datasets and therefore inconclusive. The archives for certain fields contain gaps and abrasions in the system. The American and Westernized cultural hegemony persisting for centuries.⁸³ Certain stories, perspectives, and documentation were not given the attention and care the collective academic and scholarship communities now understand they were due.

The ideology proposed in this dissertation asserts methodologies and frameworks artists, technologists, and storytellers can employ with agency. How does modern civilization rethink and expand equality as a construct that is implemented in contemporary society?

Black Escapism has become a means of Freedom. Black Future(s) Innovators will continue to decolonize information through aggregated technologies and storytelling. Auto-science-fiction has become a serendipitous tool. These verticals are the foundation of my work. A wunderkammer, a container by which my cabinet of curiosities exists within. Black Alchemy quickly became a critical enterprise, and the archives became the geographical map as well as the time map by which all the time lines could become stitched together. The archive fragments tell a new story, a story for this day and age. Distorted (virtual) Realities as mentioned, not only points to a moment of resolve for the perception around the current state of socio-political affairs. Distorted (virtual) Realities gives us a data point within our Black Alchemical Universe for how the Black community can arrive at this trajectory. Black people building datasets that inform their futures and their pasts. Art and technology merge for storytelling. Art as a vessel for change, a constant voice to comment, and technology as an instrument to democratize societal innovation. This derivative of infrastructural change is available to all technologists and cultural change agents to build in the present.

⁸² Mambrol, Nasrullah, ‘Claude Levi Strauss’ Concept of Bricolage’, *Literary Theory and Criticism*, 2016
<<https://literariness.org/2016/03/21/claude-levi-strauss-concept-of-bricolage/>> [accessed 19 April 2022]

⁸³ Artz, Lee, ‘Cultural Hegemony and Racism’, 2000, pp. 71–152

// TRANSMISSION BEGINS;;

In The Beginning There Was ALCHEMY....

CODED MESSAGES FROM THE PAST..

It started with aLch=my

Black Intellectualism.

Black Prestige.

The birth of ancestral magic.

The birth of time.

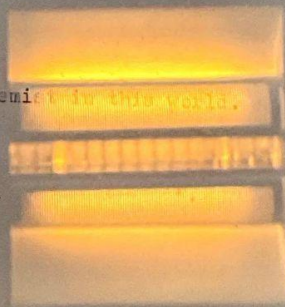
They walked through the time line s

appearing in plain sight

The archives spea k of their wonder.

SHE is the most powerful alchemist in this world.

Alchemy was always ametaphor...



***** \\ TRANSMISSION END // *****

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