# December 2022 Newsletter

The Future of Black Studies

By Abdul Alkalimat

Overview: Black Studies is a powerful response to racism: a boundary-pushing discipline, grown out of struggle and community action. Here a founder of the field presents a reimagining of future trends in the study of the Black experience.

Using Marxism, Black Experientialism, Afro-Futurism, and diaspora frameworks, Alkalimat projects a radical future for the discipline at this time of social crisis. Examining cornerstones of culture—the music of Sun Ra, the movie Black Panther, the writer Octavia Butler, and others— he looks at the trajectory of Black liberation thought since slavery, including new research on the rise in the comparative study of Black people all over the world. This book is a powerful read that will inform and inspire students and activists.
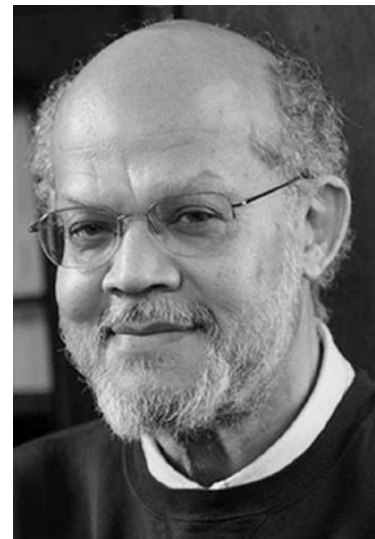
The marginalisation of Black voices from the academy is a problem in the Western world. But Black Studies, where it exists, is a powerful, boundary-pushing discipline, grown out of struggle and community action. Here, Alkalimat, one of the founders of Black Studies in the United States, presents a reimagining of the future trends in the study of the Black experience.
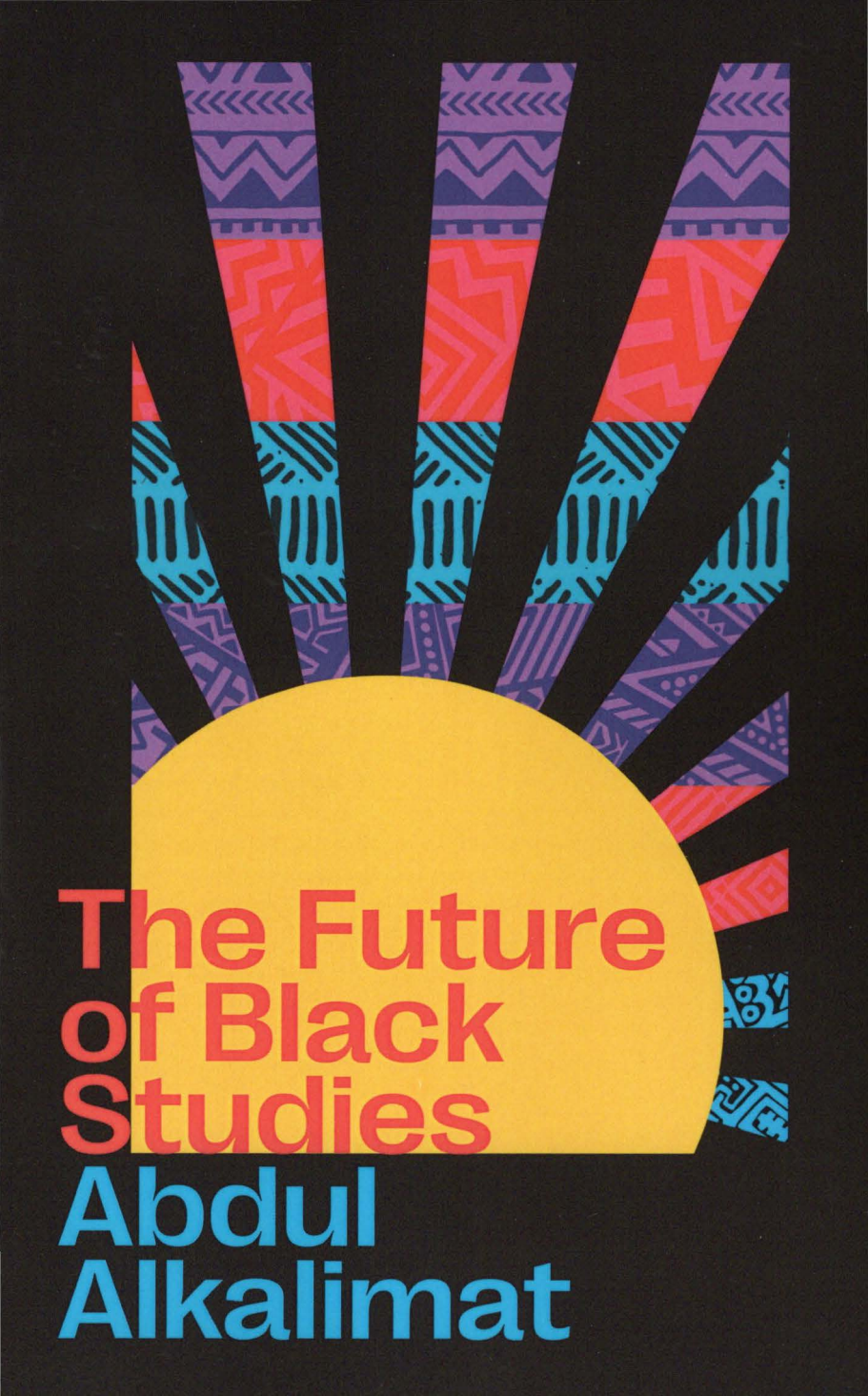
About the author: Abdul is a founder of the field of Black Studies and Professor Emeritus at the University of Illinois at

Urbana Champaign. A lifelong scholar-activist with a PhD from the University of Chicago, he has lectured, taught and directed academic programs across the United States, the Caribbean, Africa, Europe, and China. His activism extends from having been chair of the Chicago chapter of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) in the 1960s, to a co-founder of the Black Radical Congress in 1998. He is the author of the companion volume to this book, *The History of Black Studies* (Pluto Press, 2021).

The following pages provide an excerpt from this study, presenting the introduction chapter and a précis of Afro-Futurism's remarkable trajectory, from *The Future of Black Studies* (Pluto Press, London, 2021; paperback ISBN: 9780745347004, eBook ISBN: 9780745347028, 272 pp.).

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The Future of Black Studies

Abdul Alkalimat

The Future of Black Studies

"Alkalimat's unique talent and skill, as a life-long teacher, is to unpack, make accessible, and organize layers of knowledge, turning it into academic coursework. Alkalimat is encyclopedic, radical, yet accommodative of all streams of Black Liberation. As Steve Biko said, 'students are firstly members of the Black community, where the struggle is waged'; for Alkalimat, Black Studies are about the history, the present and the future of Black Freedom."

—Vusi Mchunu a.k.a. Macingwane, South African poet,
Chairperson of the Freedom Park Council

"Written by one of its African-American founding fathers, the book places Black Studies at the intersection of American history, progressive social movements, and academia. In tracing the emergence of Diaspora Studies and the role of African and Caribbean thinkers, Abdul Alkalimat builds on a life-long commitment, decades of research, and a global network to provide unique insights into little-known diasporic linkages that extend to countries as diverse as England, Germany, Ghana, and Jamaica."

—Nii Addy, German-Ghanaian Political Scientist

Praise for *The History of Black Studies*

"Abdul Alkalimat is one of the most rigorous and committed Black radical thinkers of our time."
—Barbara Ransby, award-winning author of *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement*

"Magisterial [...] The most comprehensive history of the field of Black Studies. This landmark book will become a standard in the history of our field."
—Molefi Kete Asante, Professor at the Department of Africology, Temple University

"Abdul Alkalimat, one of the pioneers of Black Studies, has done a great service by providing a powerful, expansive, and compelling history of the field."
—Keisha N. Blain, award-winning author and co-editor of the #1 New York Times Bestseller *400 Souls*

"This is Alkalimat's magnum opus [...] a focal point for scholarship on the history of Africana thought in the academy. It is required reading for Black Studies scholars and intellectual historians."
—Fabio Rojas, Virginia L. Roberts Professor of Sociology Indiana University

"A visionary and a documentarian, Alkalimat has been a major figure in the Black Studies movement since its modern inception. This landmark book is indispensable."
Martha Biondi, author of *The Black Revolution on Campus*

"Stunning [...] a precious guide to a forgotten past as well as a valuable tool for future battles over the political direction of education against racism."
—Paul Gilroy, author of *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack*

"A must-read chronicle of one of the most significant developments in US social movements, making more visible the role of Black women who have too often been footnotes in this history. Even veteran pioneers and Black Studies comrades will be wowed!"
—Beverly Guy-Sheftall, the Anna Julia Cooper Professor of Women's Studies at Spelman College

The Future of Black Studies

Abdul Alkalimat

PLUTO **PRESS**

To my wife Kate, who I will share my future with.

To my grandsons, niece and nephew for the future they will live:
Donis, Solomon, Lucie and Ben.

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Introduction

This book is about the future of Black Studies.

One of the aspects of being human is the experience of time. Most cultures encode historical time in collective consciousness, including some sense of the past, the present, and the future. This is no less true for Africans and African descendants throughout the African Diaspora. We seek to remember Africa before the European invasion and takeover. We imagine a future beyond our oppression that makes colonization merely an interruption and not a permanent replacement of our own history. We work to recapture African history, to once again be driven by African agency in theory and in practice. African Americans, at every stage of the US experience of oppression and exploitation, have remembered our collective pain and its perpetrators, and imagined freedom, the absence of that pain, and the creation of a sustainable future of well-being and prosperity.

All this recommences with every advance in the progress of the freedom struggle. And this energizes Black Studies: "That beat has carried Black Studies from academic immigrancy to forceful, scholarly citizenship in the American University. And the new story of Black Studies is the amazing proliferation of its energies in a manner that makes avoidance or eradication impossible" (Baker 1993, 32). The future of Black Studies itself has long been debated, but after fifty years of development, contemporary Black Studies has established itself as a stable fixture in education, especially in higher education. Given this sustainability, it is important to look at today's innovation to see how Black Studies is actually moving into its future.

In the companion volume to this one, the *History of Black Studies*, I analyzed Black Studies in three ways: as intellectual history, as a social movement, and as an academic profession. Each of these ways had high points that were sequential, but together represent manifestations of the production and distribution of knowledge about the Black experience as acts of agency against the oppression and exploitation of Black people. Black Studies includes both theory and practice, science and art. It involves both campus and community (Alkalimat 2021).

Black Studies as intellectual history has its academic foundation in the scholarship of the first two generations of Black PhDs. This provided a treasure trove of intellectual faculty talent at historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs), because of segregationist practices of mainstream institutions. Great periods of productivity of scholarship on the Black experience took place at such institutions as Howard University, Fisk University, and the Atlanta University Center. Intellectual and cultural creativity had origins in the institutions of the Black community as well. This is especially true in large regional cities with large Black populations, for example, New Orleans, New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles. The third source of Black Studies as intellectual history is the ideological development of the Black Freedom Movement.

We discussed Black Studies as social movement in six ways: the Freedom Movement, the Black Power Movement, the Black Arts Movement, the New Communist Movement, the Black Women's Movement, and the Black Student Movement. Each of these included education programs, mass education for the community, and cadre-level education for movement activists. A critical development was the new emergent institutions, often called Freedom Schools. These community-based freedom schools were based on curriculum development in Black history, Black culture, and ideologies of social justice protest.

Finally, the history of Black studies includes formal academic programs, especially in higher education. In the *History of Black Studies*, data from 2013 is presented that indicate 76 percent of institutions of higher education offer some sort of Black Studies, including 331 degree-granting units. By 2019, this number had increased to 356 (Alkalimat 2021, 235). There are now over a dozen units that grant the PhD degree in Black Studies. For the most part, these academic programs fit into the normative structure of their institutional context, from research universities to community colleges, in both private and public institutions. However, it must be noted that, in times of crisis, the activist social justice function latent in these programs comes to the fore. Academic programs in Black Studies have a continuing tie to the political life of the Black community, sometimes with the support of faculty and sometimes as a challenge to faculty.

The future of Black Studies has to take into consideration what is being projected as the future of the society in general, especially what is impacting the Black community. At the turn of the century, dystopian thinking began to come from the highest levels of society. Samuel Huntington, a

former Harvard political scientist, has been a leading voice on a dystopian politics for the US future. He laid the basis for the war against Iraq and the current plague of Islamophobia with his book *Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (1996). This book argues that there can be no future coexistence of Christianity and Islam, thereby laying the basis for a holy war that the USA continues to fight today. He has also written a book that laid the ideological basis for the current immigration crisis, in which he projects conflict with people of Latino nationalities because they are not submitting to Anglo assimilationist transformation: *Who Are We? The Challenges to American National Identity* (2004). Huntington sees the future as a war against non-European descendant populations, Muslims and Latinos. This is an academic argument that produces white supremacist nationalism, and has a direct negative impact on Black people (Huntington 2004; 2011).

More currently, the absolute failure of the former US president Donald Trump to affirm a scientifically valid approach to the Covid pandemic led to a section of society volunteering to embrace the risk of death, a form of politically sanctioned suicide resulting in the USA having the highest rate of deaths in the world. This bad leadership has emboldened a dangerous skepticism against science and a loss of confidence in public health, putting everyone in danger. What future does this lead us to?

The mass media, too, is full of negative visions of dystopian futures. A good example is the television series started in 2010 called *The Walking Dead* (created by Frank Darabont). It is a post-apocalyptic horror television series that pits zombies against humans in general, but also pits humans against each other frequently. The series makes killing to stay alive a moral necessity for everyone. This starkly good-versus-evil narrative creates a cultural mindset in its viewers that there are dangerous others to be faced and killed if one is to survive, which includes not being infected and becoming a zombie oneself. There is no cure, no hope, only life versus 'the walking dead'. The series has been a big success, and here is how Wikipedia sums up its popularity:

> *The Walking Dead* has the highest total viewership of any series in cable television history, including its third through sixth seasons, during which it averaged the most 18- to 49-year-old viewers of all cable or broadcast television series. Total viewership for its fifth-season premiere was 17.3 million, the most-watched series episode in cable history. In 2016, a *New York Times* study of the 50 television series with

the most Facebook Likes found that like most other zombie series, *The Walking Dead* "is most popular in rural areas, particularly southern Texas and eastern Kentucky."

(Wikipedia 2020c)

This fiction is leaping into our reality via the drugs approved by the US Food and Drug Administration and prescribed by medical professionals to stem the pain and despair many people feel. Prozac and Simulac psychotropic drugs have even been implicated in suicides and homicides. In contrast to these dystopias, this book asserts that the future is possible.

The current fiction version is a direct exposure of the evil machinations of the capitalist system, *Squid Game*. This is a South Korean show that began in 2021 and pulls people who are in deep debt into a game that gives them a chance to become a billionaire. The hitch is that, of the 456 people who start the game, everyone will be killed until there is one winner. The horrid process was constructed as a critique of capitalism, but for its viewers the massive death exhibited drags you into the capitalist cauldron of evil. The television show was written by Hwang Dong-hyuk.

Hwang wrote *Squid Game* based on his own personal experiences and observations of capitalism and economic class struggle within South Korea. Hwang also considered that his script was targeted towards global issues regarding capitalism, stating, "I wanted to create something that would resonate not just for Korean people but globally. This was my dream." and "I do believe that the overall global economic order is unequal and that around 90% of the people believe that it's unfair. During the pandemic, poorer countries can't get their people vaccinated. They're contracting viruses on the streets and even dying. So I did try to convey a message about modern capitalism. As I said, it's not profound."

("*Squid Game*" 2022)

The future we need is the opposite of dystopia. We need a positive future. To understand the struggles of Black people, and how Black people have been able to celebrate life even under harsh conditions, we have to seek and evaluate the positive influence of Black Studies. Specifically, Black Studies prepares a diagnosis of the present-past, while seeking a perspective and policies to improve the quality of life in the present-future. This

is a recognition that the past and the future are intimately connected to the present—all the dynamics of a dialectical process.

Imagining a society in which all people can lead the good life is to create a utopia, a desired alternative to what exists in a society. Thomas More coined this word in 1516, using a Greek word meaning nowhere (More 1900). It was the design for a society better than what was being experienced in the Europe of his time. So, the use of the word "utopia" means a criticism of society by way of imagining a better one. Oppressed people have this at the heart of their most cherished forms of historical consciousness—religious, political, and social. They seek to answer the question: can't we imagine something better, some realization of freedom?

Black Studies is an educational context for such imagination, both about society and about Black Studies itself. People in Black Studies do not separate the two. The future of the academic discipline is inseparable from the future of society and the institutions of education that house Black Studies. This is what this volume seeks to explore: the future of Black Studies in the context of the future of society. It proceeds by looking at three exciting advances: Afrofuturism, the African Diaspora, and eBlack Studies.

Part I will rethink the theoretical focus on what is being called Afrofuturism. This has mainly been a concept tied to the speculative artistic and technological innovators in music, film, and science fiction. This volume will take a different approach, anchoring thinking about the future in Black intellectual political history. We have always marched toward the future we want.

A tension in Afrofuturism is the philosophical dialectic of idealism versus materialism. Idealism holds that ideas are primary, while materialism holds that material forces are primary in our understanding of reality (Cornforth 1975). To some extent, in Western philosophy, this is the difference between Plato as an idealist and Aristotle as a materialist. This distinction should not be misinterpreted, however, to mean that ideas are not essential, because they are critical and must be developed as a vital part of all human activity, both in science and in art.

Ideas are hypothetical until demonstrated to accurately reflect the nature of material reality. In social life, our morality, our sense of social justice, helps us to imagine a future better than the one we are living in, even though we have the dilemma that there are many conflicting ideas of this future. In any case, the test of any idea about social life is its application in social practice. This book makes the case for enriching

Afrofuturism with the ways various Black people and communities have looked at the future.

Critical rethinking of Afrofuturism is the content of Chapter 1. With this as the basis, the next three chapters will focus on the three main ways that Black people have dealt with the future. Chapter 2, "Imagining the Future," is about how Black intellectuals and artists have projected images of society into the future with speculative thinking, including fantasy in cultural production. This is about positing an imaginary future with a critique of the present. Chapter 3, "Back to the Future," focuses on how the future has been thought about based on the past. This is the *Sankofa Principle*: going back to the past to get a perspective on what future is most desirable. Chapter 4 discusses the main ways that Black people have struggled for their future. They have fought against their oppressors to create a future free from oppression and in this process have connected their future to reforms and even revolution.

Part II will discuss the globalization of Black Studies as it has transformed into African Diaspora studies. Beginning with the historical origin of African Americans before and as a result of the European slave trade dispersal, the African Diaspora is the site of historical similarities and differences that present an opportunity to place the Black experience more firmly in world history. Chapter 5 will discuss the emergence of the African Diaspora as a framework for ideology as well as scholarship. Chapter 6 will focus on how the African Diaspora is increasingly guiding the research and curriculum development of Black Studies. Some departments are changing their names to embrace this new focus. Chapter 7 looks to the African Diaspora itself to examine how Black Studies is being developed on a worldwide scale.

Part III will discuss the development of eBlack Studies, and how the use of information technology is transforming Black Studies. Chapter 8 will survey the importance of science and technology in Black history and Black consciousness. Chapter 9 will review the theoretical literature that clarifies four different theses about the impact of information technology on the Black experience. We will use the Toledo model to identify programmatic innovations in Chapter 10. We will also discuss a new methodological framework for Black Studies based on the use of digital tools.

The basic argument here is that the future of Black Studies will include at least three key developments: (1) the study of how Black people think about and prepare for the future; (2) the study of all Black people in the

world by focusing on the African Diaspora; and (3) the study of how information technology is changing the production and distribution of knowledge about the Black experience. Each of these three developments is part of general processes of change. Globalization and information technology is forcing everyone to rethink their understanding of society, and that includes the future. Black Studies will be moving with the times.

In general, these future conceptions have emerged as expressions of two alternative forms of political agency, reform, and revolution, the first improving the system in incremental quantitative ways, versus the second transforming the system in fundamental qualitative ways. Actually, almost all change represents the dialectic of reform and revolution, the relationship between a strategy for freedom (long-range transformative goals, qualitative) and tactics of the ongoing struggle (immediate plans of action, quantitative).

One salient crisis in this process is the individualism that many times captures students and faculty. When Black Studies is delinked from the needs of the community in favor of the idiosyncratic concerns of one or more individuals, it is possible that the original mission of Black Studies has been betrayed. Of course, the future can only exist if there are degrees of freedom for the intellectuals, scholars, and artists, but it is equally important that Black Studies contributes to the historical strategic goal of freedom that involves the entire Black community and the society in general.

With all of these concerns, we will explore the future of Black Studies by reflecting on Afrofuturism, the African Diaspora, and the rise of eBlack Studies, through which information technology is opening new possibilities.

1

Rethinking Afrofuturism

This chapter presents a rethinking of the concept of Afrofuturism. In other words, how African Americans have thought about and studied the future will increasingly be part of the future of Black Studies. This is an intrinsically human experience, especially since all life forms seek to live and that means a concern for the future. Indeed, this is doubly so for humans, as our existential reality is that we know we will die, and that puts a limit on any future we might have.

This chapter will break down Afrofuturism by contrasting utopian thinking with dialectical and historical materialism, contrasting what we can dream up as a most desired future versus what we can actually achieve as we march through the history we live. Following this chapter will be chapters discussing three types of Afrofuturism: imagination as the basis for the future; the historical past as the basis for the future; and creating the future through the struggle for social change, both reform and revolution.

Afrofuturism was coined by Mark Dery in 1993 to cover a wide variety of activities envisioning futures (R. Anderson and Jones 2017). It is important to make a distinction between utopian thinking and a more scientific approach to the future, to distinguish fantasy from fact, speculative guesswork from hypotheses that can be investigated based on evidence. Afrofuturism in Black Studies will include both, but the most important focus has to be the agency of Black people on the march to freedom in all varieties of Afrofuturism. We have to include scholarship, cultural performance, and agency for social change.

One of the scholars responsible for the rise of the current manifestation of Afrofuturism as the name for forms of cultural activism is Alondra Nelson, who edited a special issue of the journal *Social Text* on Afrofuturism. In her introduction, she identified a polarity that had to be addressed: "Forecasts of a utopian (to some) race-free future and pronouncements of the dystopian digital divide are the predominant discourses of blackness and technology in the public sphere" (Nelson 2002, 1).

Nelson had created an online community called Afrofuturism in 1998, which was mainly based in the humanities and the arts. She clarifies further by focusing on technology.

The Afrofuturism list emerged at a time when it was difficult to find discussions of technology and African American diasporic communities that went beyond the notion of the digital divide. From the beginning, it was clear that there was much theoretical territory to be explored. Early discussions included the concept of digital double consciousness; African diasporic cultural retentions in modern technoculture; digital activism and issues of access; dreams of designing technology based on African mathematical principles; the futuristic visions of black film, video, and music; the implications of the then burgeoning MP3 revolution; and the relationship between feminism and Afrofuturism.

(Nelson 2002, 9)

Her pointing to a positive future leads us to the concept of utopia. Alex Zamalin, in his book *Black Utopia: The History of an Idea from Black Nationalism to Afrofuturism*, presents eight case studies of utopian and anti-utopian Black intellectuals (Zamalin 2019). Placing utopian thinking in a historical context, his first case is Martin Delaney (1812–1885). After racist faculty and students expelled him from Harvard Medical School and a subsequent career in the Union Army, Delaney rejects the racist colonial negation of Black people by turning to the African Diaspora for a new affirmation and vision of a new future. Zamalin summarizes Delaney's basic ideas:

Delaney found equality, dignity, and freedom in black lives. He said no to white supremacy, exposed the drama of political contingency, and told of power's vulnerability. This was the vision Delaney modeled to inspire resistance to reach black utopia abroad. But it wasn't extended to a defense of gender equality, popular rule, and economic freedom.

(Zamalin 2019, 33)

Utopian projections of new gender relations were discussed in the fiction of Francis Harper (1825–1911) and Pauline Hopkins (1859–1930). The writings of Samuel Delany (1942–) extended a utopian vision to LGBTQ rights. This is an essential correction to the error of silencing the voices of women and gay intellectuals about their own reality.

Zamalin treats W.E.B. Du Bois (1868–1963) as a utopian in his work on the freedom struggles of Black people, especially his work *Black Reconstruction* (1935). This focuses on the concept of democracy:

> For DuBois, democracy illuminated something of the dialectic between beginnings and ends, struggles and reversals, progress and reaction, change and uncertainty, the unknown and the unknown unknown. For all these contradictions, it was the aspiration to live in a democracy that, Du Bois believed, could rebuild the world in which all Americans would want to live.
>
> (Zamalin 2019, 61–62)

Du Bois, a materialist, anchored his work on Reconstruction in historical research. He helped us to see a future of democracy not via pure speculation, but as the result of class struggle led by Black workers.

On a global scale, Zamalin treats Richard Wright as a reality check on pan-African utopian thinking. Wright went to Ghana in 1953 and wrote a book, *Black Power*, detailing his experience and thoughts about the African freedom struggle:

> Without question, *Black Power*'s rhetorical structure as a blend of memoir, political critique, and travelogue obscured Wright's view of freedom. But this careful meditation on what freedom meant to Africans suggested that, for him, it was something more expressive and expansive than was developed by the NAACP political strategy of litigation for political enfranchisement. Wright saw freedom as a lived experience dependent upon but irreducible to certain political rights. It was about shaping one's destiny without another's say, a new beginning in which one would identify what counted as meaningful.
>
> (Zamalin 2019, 89)

The anti-utopian thinkers have pointed out that utopia can lead to an authoritarianism that would negate the vision of freedom associated with utopian thinking. Zamalin uses the work of George Schuyler (1895–1977) as an example of this kind of analysis. Many would argue that this reversal of democracy developed in the socialist countries and in the newly independent African former colonies. There continues to be a debate about to what extent Nkrumah was a mix of a revolutionary emancipator and an authoritarian leader in leading the transformation of Ghana.

Zamalin argues that it is possible to embrace the dialectic of utopian and anti-utopian elements to remain relevant to the freedom struggle:

> Energizing contemporary freedom struggles and imagining the impossible require combining the most productive elements of black utopian imagination and antiutopian critique, rather than accepting the false choice between them. It means reclaiming the sense of freedom without dehumanization and accepting the idea of perfectibility without fundamentalism. It means embracing radical equality and resisting gender and sexual domination. And it means taking seriously radical hope in the face of the unknown without messianic deliverance.
>
> Zamalin (2019, 139–40)

While some Afrofuturist scholars suggest their focus covers a big inclusive category based on technological advances, for our purpose, it is important to focus the concept on historical time. Historical time of the past, present, and future is fundamental to humans. Our consciousness is based on memory and perception, and our ability to imagine a future based on reason, morality, and whatever cultural mix of what we know and believe makes sense to us.

All thoughts about the future, especially broad inclusive thoughts about a new future, are speculative. In fact, they are guesses, even if educated guesses based on scientific research and/or growing out of artistically creativity. We experience them in the present and they can make us feel good or bad, be hopeful or discouraged, be expectant or fearful. No matter, because our being in the world makes thinking about the future a necessity, as well as preparing for it. This is especially true during periods of social and economic change, when old patterns of life are no longer workable and, whether we like it or not, new developments are taking place and life will not be the same. The challenge is to grasp the fundamental logic of the historical process, prepare a plan for the future, and then to practice an intervention to participate in and influence the direction of change. Marx urges us to do just this in his *Thesis on Feuerbach*, number eleven: "The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world, in various ways; the point, however is to *change* it" (Marx and Engels 1969, 15).

A critical study of historical experience is illustrative of this point. Frederick Engels discusses utopian thinking at the time when industrial capitalism was being born and replacing the existing feudal social forma-

tion. He makes a biting critique of utopian thinkers about the future in
Socialism Utopian and Scientific:

> To the crude conditions of capitalistic production and the crude class
> conditions corresponded crude theories. The solution of the social
> problems, which as yet lay hidden in undeveloped economic con-
> ditions, the Utopians attempted to evolve out of the human brain.
> Society presented nothing but wrongs; to remove these was the task
> of reason. It was necessary, then, to discover a new and more perfect
> system of social order and to impose this upon society from without
> by propaganda, and wherever it was possible, by the example of model
> experiments. These new social systems were foredoomed as Utopian;
> the more completely they were worked out in detail, the more they
> could not avoid drifting off into pure phantasies.
>
> (Marx and Engels 1973, 119)

Engels discusses three such thinkers: Henri de Saint-Simon (1760–
1825), Charles Fourier (1772–1837), and Robert Owen (1771–1858). His
focus is their attempt to think up a solution, relying on reason, but not
through a study of actual experience and the past practice encoded in
political culture. As a consequence of this idealism, the model utopian
communities founded on their ideas were not sustainable and did not
prove to be clear models for society, although they demonstrated the
power of a moral vision. In fact, some positive reforms came out of these
efforts including the eight-hour workday and the cooperative movement.
These innovative changes live on today. So, while utopian thinking does
usually end up as fantasy, the desire for a better life can at times translate
such a vision into practical reforms.

Other important examples are the utopian models advocated as part
of the decolonization process. In Africa, a key challenge was to imagine
a future to replace the disruptive rule by European colonizers. One such
experiment was the Ujamaa village scheme under the leadership of Presi-
dent Julius Nyerere (1922–1999) in Tanzania. This scheme was to anchor
development in the hands of the African masses who could rebuild the
society on the basis of traditional culture. Many scholar activists chal-
lenged this view and examined class struggle as a more accurate reflection
of the historical process (Campbell 1975; Shivji 1979).

A.M. Babu (1924–1996), former minister of economic development in
Tanzania, in the spirit of Engels, rejects the utopian model.

A glaring example is that of Tanzanian President Nyerere's *Ujamaa* experiment. While it is true that his ideas were motivated by the highest moral convictions on his part, theoretically and in practice they have proved to be limited and unworkable. His conception of development is very close to that of the Narodniks, and Lenin's critique of the latter is applicable to this instance. *Ujamaa*'s declared target is to improve the material conditions of the peasant, "at his own risk and responsibility for the market," by methods firmly rooted in the old system, at the same time resuscitating social values corresponding to a pre-feudal mode of production. The policy does not in the least envisage the need to *transform* him into a new person belonging to a new class—a need created by the development of the productive forces and new relations of production—with corresponding new social values.

(Babu 1981, xv)

The Narodnik tendency that developed in mid-nineteenth-century Russia held the view that the peasantry was capable of creating a post-capitalist society. This view romanticized the rural folk, and failed to take into consideration their actual existence and inability to lead the industrialization of society. This is a fundamental negation of a future by defining it in terms of the past, without realizing that the future will have to be something new based on existing historical developments (Lenin 1914).

There are many instances of African-American utopian thinking. They are instructive for how this kind of speculative thinking leads to practices that fall short of the goal of sustainable progress in securing the well-being of the community. During Reconstruction, Black people founded their own towns. For example, the so-called "exodusters" migrated to Kansas and founded towns such as Nicodemus (Painter 1992). These proved to be transitional movements away from places maintaining the legacy of slavery, but did not develop into models for a permanent solution to the oppression of Black people. This did not end in that period, however, reemerging during the high tide of Black resistance in the 1960s. One case is the utopian community called Soul City, founded by Floyd McKissick (1922–1991) (McKissick 1969; Strain 2004; Minchin 2005).

McKissick, born and educated in North Carolina, became a lawyer in his home state. He rose to a high-ranking national position in the civil rights organization, the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE). Following the lead of James Farmer in CORE, Roy Innes and Floyd McKissick took CORE in the new direction of Black Power, especially Black economic

empowerment. Soul City was a utopian retreat from the battlefield of the Civil Rights/Black Liberation Movement, under the assumption that a planned community could achieve the goals of freedom within the capitalist system. It was not to be exclusively a Black town: "Soul City will be an attempt to move into the future, a future where Black people welcome white people as equals" (Strain 2004, 57). The plan was to secure land, organize a planning process, recruit people as residents and a labor force, and then recruit capital investment to create jobs and economic viability:

> Developed by Floyd B. McKissick Enterprises, Incorporated, Soul City would be located on a 5,180-acre site, fifty miles north of the Raleigh/Durham/Chapel Hill area, in a rural, economically depressed part of the piedmont. ... The city was intended not only to stem the migration of rural Blacks to the city, but also to entice urban residents back to the countryside from the slums of U.S. cities. It offered an alternative to urban social miseries.

(Strain 2004, 58–59)

Soul City was located in Warren County, one of the poorest counties in the state. From 1967 to 1977, the first billboard that drivers entering the county (and the state) saw welcomed people to Klan country. Funding for Soul City came from loans and support from the federal government. McKissick, a self-defined political pragmatist, supported Nixon and got his favor, but failed to get the support of Senator Helms even after supporting him. Helms, the arch-segregationist, told McKissick that his first move after being re-elected was to fight against any funding for Soul City, and that proved decisive.

Soul City lasted ten years, 1969–1979, but after that all residential addresses were reverted back to a rural county level system. Although the population dwindled down from its height of a few hundred, some people continued to live there and celebrate its memory. Its biggest obstacle was economic, in that they could not recruit enough business investment to create jobs. They were isolated without sufficient infrastructure and skilled labor. However, they did accomplish some important developments that improved the quality of life of a three-county area, mainly water and sewage systems. They established a health clinic that also provided dental care.

This utopian experiment started with mainstream bank loans and government grants, and was dependent on corporate investment. The people

who relocated to Soul City were believers in the utopian ideal and were prepared to put their bodies on the line to help it come alive. Some good things happened, but it was doomed from the very beginning, based on how it got started in the first place.

We are also living in the midst of challenging times. Just as the birth of capitalism led to utopian thinking, so too in this period of transformative change based on the new technologies and class polarization do we have the same result—new utopian thinking. Of course, as has been pointed out, the mainstream is feeding the public images of a dystopian future. To counter this, utopian thinking has re-emerged.

Another important utopian scheme has been the movement to transform the Black Belt south, particularly in the state of Mississippi, into the Republic of New Afrika (RNA) (Obadele 1984; 1974; 1975; Sonebeyatta and Brooks 1971):

> In the late 1960s, a convention of Black delegates met in Detroit, Michigan and proclaimed that Black People in the United States were in fact a Nation of People separate from the American people. This convention of delegates, including Imari Obadele (who was later elected president of the Black Nation) gave that Nation of People a name, the Republic of New Afrika. The Republic of New Afrika took the concept of Black Nationalism to its ultimate stage when, in 1968, it declared Black People to be free and independent of the United States government.

> (Black History in America n.d.)

A national leadership was elected and became a force within Black nationalism. People began to relocate to Mississippi from northern cities, but conflict developed as the RNA members were not working within the historical political culture of Black people in Mississippi. Of course, the racist forces used every resource of the state and white supremacists to block their program. The RNA developed an activist militant youth wing that called itself the Malcolm X Grassroots Movement (MXGM). The greatest accomplishment of the MXGM was holding people's assemblies after the Hurricane Katrina disaster that led to the election of one of their members, Chokwe Lumumba (1947–2014), as the mayor of Jackson, Mississippi. Following his early death, the election of his son to work within the city government did not keep revolutionary movement building as the top priority. MXGM forces made a move to reconnect

with the utopian vision and build an autonomous process to achieve self-determination.

An example of this is the turn to cooperatives, in the spirit of Robert Owen, as a path to escape the terror of racism and capitalist exploitation. Activists in Jackson, Mississippi, represent such a trend. They make explicit their association with the experience of the Mondragón cooperative movement in the Basque Country, Spain. Here is how they explain their goal of social transformation as one of their key principles:

Social Transformation: Cooperation in the Cooperation Jackson system is an instrument for social transformation. As Jose Maria Arizmendiarrieta, a founder of the Mondragón system wrote "Cooperation is the authentic integration of people in the economic and social process that shapes the new social order; the cooperators must make the objective extend to all those that hunger and thirst for justice in the working world." The cooperatives of Cooperation Jackson will reinvest the major portion of their surpluses in Jackson and Kush District (the contiguously Afrikan counties of western Mississippi). Following the Mondragón model, a significant portion of our surplus will go toward new job development, to community development (through the use of social funds), to a social security system based on mutual solidarity and responsibility, to cooperation with other institutions advancing the cause of workers in Mississippi, and to collaborative efforts to developing a transformative culture in Mississippi.

(Cooperation Jackson 2020)

This project developed out of "The Jackson–Kush Plan: The Struggle for Self-Determination and Economic Democracy," written by Kali Akuno and adopted by the New Afrikan People's Organization and the Malcolm X Grassroots Movement (Akuno 2012). This is a well-reasoned plan that has attracted a great deal of attention and support. So one might ask, why is this utopian thinking being presented in the same way that Engels presented his argument; after all, Akuno refers to the working class in general terms. The challenge is to base a program on both the quantitative study of the actual social conditions facing the Black community and the subjective consciousness that enables the people to understand their condition and have a desire to fight to change these very conditions (Akuno 2012).

Three issues of the *Negro Digest* several decades earlier had engaged a diverse set of scholars on these very questions about a better future for Black people in higher education. This dialogue was very rich, in that the voices of veteran administrators were contrasted with the visionary voices of young scholars and activists. While all sought a future that improved on what was currently in place, the different viewpoints juxtaposed reform with revolutionary change (McWorter 1968; 1969; 1970).

Darwin Turner (1932–1991), then dean of the graduate school at the Agricultural and Technical State University of North Carolina at Greensboro, argued that the fight for the future was to take place as reforms within the existing institutions:

> Most reform ends in revolution. Perhaps that will be the inevitable result in any effort to reform higher education for Negroes in the United States. Nevertheless, before proposing the revolutionary step of establishing a new institution—a black university—I wish to suggest ways of achieving the desired improvement within the present structure of higher education. … Let us dream of the ideal institution—one which will give growth to Negro teachers and students alike. It is, I repeat, one which can be developed within the current framework of higher education—if it is to be developed at all.
>
> (Turner, cited in McWorter 1968, 15 and 17)

Chuck Hopkins, a student from the protests at Duke University, put forward an activist projection of a new future. He recounted and characterized the launch of Malcolm X Liberation University outside of the current framework of higher education:

> In October 1969, in Durham, North Carolina, the Black community saw its dream of a relevant Black educational institution become a reality with the opening of Malcolm X Liberation University in an old warehouse which had been cleaned out and renovated. On the 25th of October, over 3,000 Black people from Durham and communities around the country gathered in front of the building site to listen to the dedication message of Sister Betty Shabazz, widow of Brother Malcolm X. Sister Betty charged the participants in the ceremonies and Black people around the world with the task of organizing for Black unity and building for the Black nation.
>
> (Hopkins, cited in McWorter 1970, 39)

These two approaches to change—the one working within the system and the other forging new ground outside of the established system—work dialectically together in creating a future. The main point here is that our concern with Afrofuturism has to mainly look to Black people's agency in fighting to create a new future for themselves.

We will continue to face the contradiction of idealism versus materialism in efforts to think about the future as well as in efforts to create the future. People who are idealists have positive intentions based on their ideas, values, and moral standards. However, without a materialist analysis of the actual contradictions in society, and on that basis finding the social forces able to resist and create change, the social transformation toward freedom will not take place. Projects like Cooperation Jackson are necessary but are not sufficient: people need to survive, but they also need to solve their problems once and for all.

There is an Afrofuturism crisis in Black Studies as discussed. There is an urgency to the condition of Black people. This requires clarity in understanding their actual experience. Our task in this volume is to rethink Afrofuturism as a way of understanding how Black people have actually dealt with the future. We will explore answers to three key questions: How have Black people imagined a future of freedom? How have Black people used the past to think about their future? How have Black people dealt with the future in their actual struggles for freedom?

"Abdul Alkalimat's unique skill is to unpack and organize layers of knowledge ... Encyclopaedic, radical, yet accommodative of all streams of Black Liberation"
—Vusi Mchunu a.k.a. Macingwane, South African poet, Chairperson of the Freedom Park Council

"Written by one of its African-American founding fathers, the book places Black Studies at the intersection of American history, progressive social movements and academia. Abdul Alkalimat builds on decades of research to provide unique insights"
—Nii Addy, German-Ghanaian Political Scientist

"Timely and necessary ... A much-needed inquiry"
—Carole Boyce Davies, prize-winning author and Professor of Africana Studies and Literatures in English, Cornell University

Black Studies is a powerful response to racism: a boundary-pushing discipline, grown out of struggle and community action. Here a founder of the field presents a reimagining of future trends in the study of the Black experience.

Using Marxism, Black Experientialism, Afro-Futurism, and diaspora frameworks, Alkalimat projects a radical future for the discipline at this time of social crisis. Examining cornerstones of culture—the music of Sun Ra, the movie *Black Panther*, the writer Octavia Butler, and others—he looks at Black liberation thought since slavery, including new research on the rise in the comparative study of Black people all over the world. He then looks at how digital tools enhance all this.

This book is a powerful read that will inform and inspire students and activists.

Abdul Alkalimat is a founder of the field of Black Studies and Professor Emeritus at the University of Illinois at Urbana Champaign. A lifelong scholar-activist, he has lectured, taught and directed academic programs across the US, the Caribbean, Africa, Europe and China. He is the author of the companion volume to this book, *The History of Black Studies* (2021).