

An Introduction to Impossible Futures and the Ethics of Hopelessness

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ABSTRACT

We live in a world of many worlds—the pluriverse. In each world, concepts and ideas have different experiences and definitions, including futures, possibility, and hope. In a Eurocentric, Western world, design and futures practices are built on the ethics of hope, agency, and possibility. However, there are other worlds with different realities. We introduce you to the world of Black Liberation, an existence caught between the now and not yet. For many Afro-descendant people, their reality does not include hope. Their world is full of hopelessness. This pluriversal understanding explains why many White futures methods and practices do not work for underutilized communities, especially communities of oppressed peoples. White futurists often create futures that community members do not want or own.

Paradoxically, in the community of hopelessness, Afro-descendant people have found an ethic with which they still move forward, not based on hope in possibility but on hopelessness in impossibility. This hopeless, impossible futures practice is infused with a blues sensibility, a jazz spirituality, and a spirituals rituality. Impossibility and hopelessness are not euphemisms, fleeting states, or conditions of inadequate vision. We truly mean impossible, hopeless. Impossible futures is an inclusive practice which specifically uses an ethics of hopelessness. With an ethic of hopelessness all community members—the hopeful, the hope indifferent, the hopeless—are invited in and can flourish together without hope of achieving impossible futures, yet moving toward them. Rather than a goal to be achieved, Black liberation, based on the ethics of hopelessness, is a way of being, being regardless of hope.

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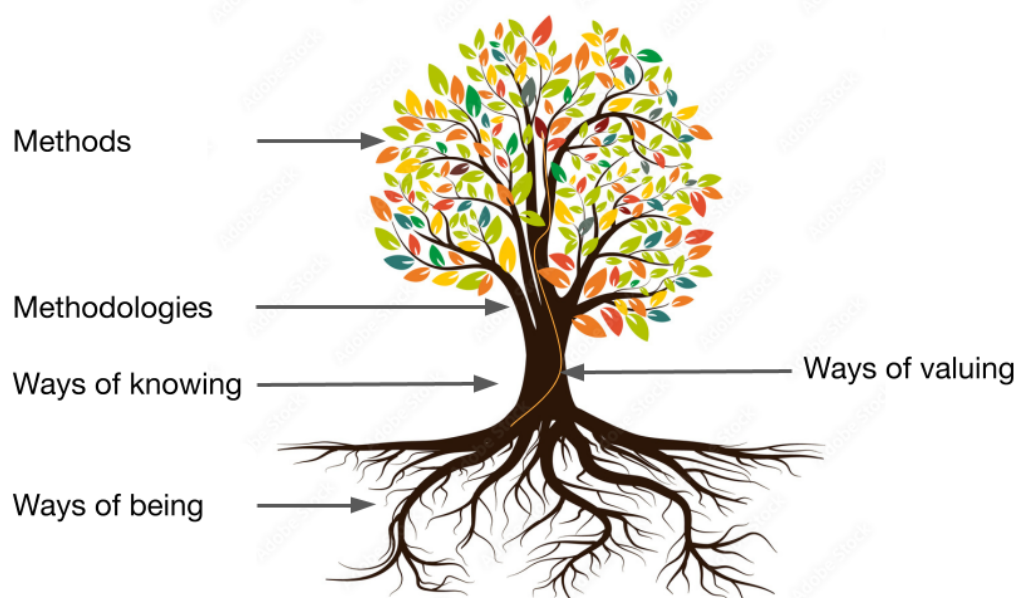
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INTRODUCTION

I am a U.S. American, male, Christian, university-trained person. I am also an immigrant-family, Black, Nigerian, invisibly disabled person from the African Indigenous people Ibibio. My Ibibio name, *Anietie*, is a shortened version of the generative, open sentence “Who is like God?” for our names are often sentences or stories. My English name, *Victor*, is a declarative word meaning winner. My two names evince how I often, even within myself, travel between different worlds, different ways of being, knowing, and doing. This practice even extends to futures, as the Indigenous Uncertainty Principle explains.

“Indigenous epistemology is all about [futures] forming through the formation of relationships. [Futures] cannot be taken out of its relational context and still maintain its shape . . . it is not possible to know exactly both the context and definition of [futures] at the same time. The closer you get to defining [futures] the more it loses its context. Conversely, the more [futures] is put into context, the more it loses its specific definition” (Wilson, 2020). Indigenous scholar Shawn Wilson talks about any idea or concept; I have specifically applied it to futures. If I define futures, we lose the context. If I describe the context, we lose any universal definition of futures. This is a quintessential description of pluriversality, the move away from a single, universal understanding of an idea or concept, a move away from a one-world world or universe, to a world of many worlds, a pluralistic multiverse, or the pluriverse.

Like other Indigenous scholars, I often use a tree metaphor to explicate pluriversality (Jobin, 2023). Additionally, in the Tree of Being, I add the image of tree sap representing different ways of valuing (Figure 1).



The roots of the Tree of Being are the worlds, existences, realities, and ways of being of a group. The worlds we inhabit affect our ways of being, and our ways of being affect our worlds and what is real. Worlds are not worldviews; worlds are also not languages, filters, lenses, or beliefs. In other words, we are not discussing a reframing of futures, but wholly different worlds, existences, and realities in which futures carries different meanings.

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From the tree roots or worlds, realities, and ways of being, emerge the tree trunk or ways of knowing. From our ways of knowing or the trunk, come the branches or our ways of doing and practicing, or methodologies. From our methodologies and ways of doing or branches, emerge the leaves or our actions, doings, activities, and methods. Finally, rising from the roots, through the trunk and branches to the leaves and fruit is the sap and nutrients, our ways of valuing and systems of value. Woven throughout our ways of being, knowing, and doing, our ways of valuing determine what problem, issue, goal, ambition, vision, or future we direct our practices or methodologies.

Each person or group with particular ways of being-knowing-valuing will have different ways of futures-doing. We now see the problem that occurs when Western, Eurocentric or White futurists use their futures methods coming from Eurocentric ways of being-knowing with workshop participants, communities, and people with different ways of being-knowing-valuing-doing. Often people not of African descent struggle with the concept of Whiteness and Blackness misinterpreting them as skin colors. In Black Studies, Blackness and Whiteness are ways of being in the world. When I say White futurists, I do not mean futurists who are white; I am talking about futurists of any ethnicity, race, or nationality who practice futures within particular, Western, Euro-centric, colonial ways of being and knowing. So white futurists do not have to be White futurists and futurists of any ethnicity can be White futurists. Often White futurists create futures that underutilized communities do not want or own (Sheraz, 2021; Inayatullah, 2008). These colonial futures create pluriversal, spiritual clashes.

Because futures has a value dimension and affects our values, it is a spiritual practice. Spirituality is the orientation and set of practices that affect, challenge, enrich, grow, and alter our interiority, purpose, values, directions, and alertness to the holistic world. Remember, in the pluriverse, every local, hyperlocal, indigenous, place-based, and people group can have different ways of being, knowing, and valuing. So the system of values and spirituality vary across the pluriverse. Let us examine how, in the pluriverse, a different way of valuing critiques a White future approach and affects our understanding, experience and practice of futures.

We start by exploring one way of valuing in the pluriverse—Black Liberation Theology. Then we examine how a Black Liberation Theological lens critiques a White futures approach and the tyranny of hope. Next we follow the contours of the colonial and postcolonial African experience of Afropessimism and Afronihilism. This leads us to a futures orientation coming out of the African experience—the ethics of hopelessness in impossible futures.

BLACK LIBERATION THEOLOGY

In the pluriverse, though linguistically similar, the Christianity of enslaved people in the U.S. was a wholly different religion than the Christianity of the enslavers (Douglas, 2019). The Christianity that arose from both the African ancestry and social location of African peoples in the U.S. also later produced different Black theologies in the 1960s. These Black theologies highlighted the political nature of historical and present-day Christianity viewing White Christianity and theology as hypocritical (Norris, 2020). Some strains highlighted Jesus's literal Blackness or focused heavily on reconciliation. In 1969, James Cone specifically introduced Black Liberation Theology that focused on ontological Blackness, Blackness as a way of being (2019). Arising out of the African-American experience from slavery through today, Black Liberation Theology brings together the Black Power of Malcolm X with the public, political theology of Martin Luther King Jr. (Cone, 1991).

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Black Liberation Theology has several components. First, similar to Latin American theology which developed at the same time, God has a preferential option for the oppressed (Cone, 2025; Gutierrez 2023). God identifies and works to liberate the oppressed, which at that time were, and today include, Black people. Second, Jesus is a liberator. Jesus's sole and primary work is being solidarity with the marginalized and liberating the oppressed. Therefore, third, liberation from systemic oppression is God's salvific work in history. Fourth, thus, God is Black. Blackness, according to Cone, is a type of ontological symbol, literal in relation to human reality, symbolic in relation to divine reality (Douglas, 2019; Tillich, 2001). For any U.S. American theology to be a Christian theology, it must contend with the Black experience because that is where God is—with the oppressed (Cone, 2013). Fifth, to be free, you must become Black. "You must become Black" is an ontological statement. You must move in solidarity with the oppressed, giving up the comfort of neutrality, adopting the theological and political commitments of the oppressed, and exposing yourself to the same harms they experience.

Womanist theologians and their intersectional analyses have improved upon and relationally taken Black Liberation Theology further. In intersectional analysis, we recognize that people sit at the intersection of multiple identities. Furthermore, as Kimberly Crenshaw noted, there are specific intersectional identities that create a unique experience (1989, 1991). For example a Black woman does not just experience the sum of anti-Black racism and sexism. She experiences a unique compounding of oppressions that is greater than sum because she experiences anti-Blackness inside of feminist movement spaces and sexism inside of race-based civil rights movement spaces. This places Black women at the bottom of the social hierarchy below both white women and Black men. Therefore, Womanist theology would say that God is not just Black, God is a Black woman (Cleveland, 2023; Johnson, 2023; Mahaffey, 2023; McIntosh, 2017; Polana, 2013). Going further, today, in the U.S. where I am located, theologians might say that God is a poor, Black, female, transgender, immigrant, Muslim person and anyone who stands in solidarity with poor, Black, female, transger, immigrant, Muslim persons.

The final component of Black Liberation Theology is its future orientation. Eschatology is the subset of theology that deals with the future, the theology of the future, or what God says about the future. Black Liberation Theology espouses a participatory eschatology. God does not create the future while African Americans watch and wait. The liberatory future highlights the ungodliness of the present, creating a dissatisfaction with the present. African Americans and those who become Black, therefore, take action and, with God, participate in the creation of that future (Cone, 2019).

BECOMING WHITE AND THE TYRANNY OF HOPE

Let us use the spirituality of Black Liberation Theology as a lens to examine design broadly and Eurocentric or White futures, more specifically. Human-centered Design (HCD) is a creative approach to problem solving that centers the humans for whom we are designing at the center of the process (IDEO, 2025). I have mapped White Futures mindsets described by various futurists to IDEO's HCD mindsets and separately listed White Futures principles mentioned by various futurists (Faiella & Corazza, 2025; IDEO.org, 2025; Boldrini, 2022; Gorbis, 2019; McGonigal, 2022, 2019a, 2010; Hines et al., 2015; Cascio, 2008; Suddendorf & Corballis, 2007). I mapped mindsets with similar words to each other. So HCD's creative confidence maps to White futures's creativity and instinct; optimism maps to urgent optimism; empathy, hard empathy; etc.

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Table 1. HCD and White Futures Mindsets (Faiella & Corazza, 2025; IDEO.org, 2025; McGonigal, 2022, 2019a, 2010; Hines et al., 2015; Cascio, 2008; Suddendorf & Corballis, 2007). Note that the first three rows on the right side remain empty because the author found no direct corollaries with futures mindsets.

HCD Mindsets	White Futures Mindsets
Learn from Failure - mistakes are part of the processes; every failure is a learning experience	
Make it - instead of saying or writing your idea, creating the idea gives you better feedback	
Iterate - we do not create the best or optimal idea initially, we learn by testing, receiving feedback, and iterating	
Creative Confidence - we have confidence in our ability to be creative and find a solution	Creativity & Instinct - futures is artistic as it needs our creativity and gut instinct to find new futures
Optimism - we are optimistic about finding a solution	Urgent Optimism, Hope, Mental flexibility, Super-empowered Hopeful Individuals - we are super hopeful and super optimistic about the future
Empathy - we look to gain empathy with the people for whom we are designing	(Hard) Empathy - through mental time travel, we can gain empathy with people in the future
Embrace Ambiguity - we don't know what we will create and that's ok	Multiple Futures - there isn't one future, there are multiple that can happen

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Table 2. White Futures Principles Named by Futurists (Boldrini, 2022; Gorbis, 2019; Hines et al., 2015).

White Futures Principles
Multiple Futures, forget predictions - it is not important to predict what will happen; it is more important to show all the possibilities which allows people to do work towards the future they prefer
Look back to look forward - first look at past trends before forecasting; hindsight before foresight
Uncover patterns - foresight is not guess work but based on analysis of data and uncovering patterns
Focus on signals - the data of foresight and futures are signals from the future which focuses our work
Create a community - don't do futures work alone, gather a community as the foresight is enriched with a community of people working together

The mindsets embody an explicit ethic of hope (Table 1). Designers and futurists must be creatively confident in their own agency (IDEO.org, 2025; Staf, 2024; Cascio, 2008). They have so much creativity and instinct to design a future or solution, that they are optimistic, urgently optimistic ([Urgentoptimists.org](https://urgentoptimists.org), 2025; McGonigal, 2016a, 2022). With a belief in their own agency and optimism about the future, they are hopeful. They are super-empowered hopeful individuals (Cascio, 2008). They are also equipped with the skill and mindset of mental flexibility which allows them not only to develop empathy, but hard empathy. Hard empathy is a creative type of empathy that helps a person imagine, know, and understand without any first-hand experience of what others are experiencing. They have the mental flexibility, optimism, agency, and hope to look back historically to look forward and see and embrace multiple futures (Table 2).

There is nothing wrong with a designer or futurist having such a strong ethic of hope, being optimistic and believing in their agency. The problem is the tyranny of hope, when these mindsets and the ethics of hope are used as a gate or gateway to the practice of HCD and White Futures. These mindsets are not supplementary and nice to have; they are required mindsets needed to practice HCD and White Futures. In fact, HCD and White Futures courses and training teach the mindsets first, and there are courses that only teach the mindsets as a preliminary course before learning the process or methodology. Without hope, you cannot practice White Futures or White design.

What does a futurist do when working with community members or workshop participants who do not have hope? Sometimes, when participants cannot imagine a hopeful future at a given time in the future, the futurist facilitator simply pushes the time horizon further in the future, hoping the longer time horizon gives more hope (Spencer & Montero Salvatico, 2018; Johansen, 2012; Voros, 2003). Other times, instead of going through a Futures process or methodology, White futurists actually use activities and exercises to teach hope, the ability to imagine, see multiple futures, and believe in your agency. Through exercises like hard empathy; predict the past, alternative histories, or counterfactual thinking; remember the future, future perfect thinking, or narrative forecasting; and specificity training, people can develop mental flexibility, mental stimulation, and the ability for mental time travel and to

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imagine hopeful futures (Tanguay et al., 2023; Hallford et al., 2020; Sools, 2020; McGonigal, 2019a, 2019b; Cuhls, 2017; Kaufman, 2010; Markley, 2008; Gioia et al., 2002).

When the gateway mindsets are missing, White futurists tend to find fault in the community members. At a recent gathering of professional futurists, the futurist listed 14 different barriers preventing people from engaging with White futures work (McGonigal, 2016b).

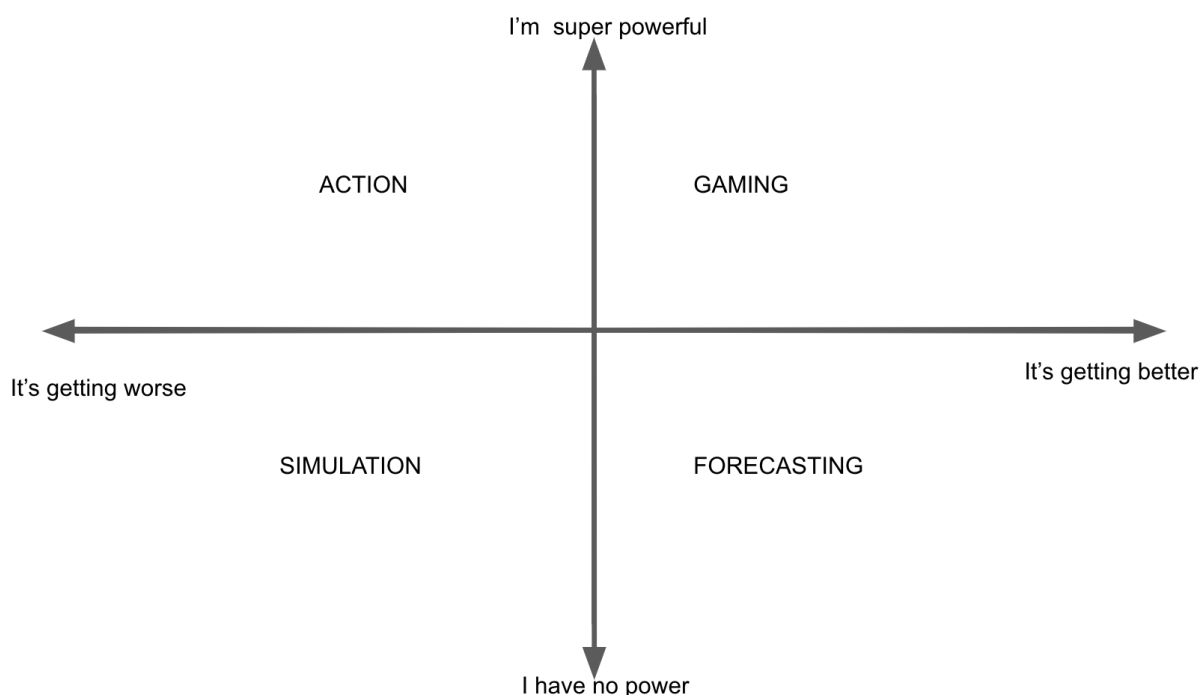
1. Lack of time due to urgent matters in the present
2. **Fear of being wrong - not wanting to look stupid or the belief that no one will listen to me even if my forecast is "right"**
3. **Belief that futures thinking is irrelevant**
4. Difficulty proving its value
5. **Lack of agency with respect to the future - The belief that I cannot affect the future and that my actions can have no affect on my community, city, region, country, or society.**
6. **Lack of hope or optimism about the future - The belief that the future is fixed, and a lack of understanding about the past. The belief that the future will be continued growth in the same direction as the present.**
7. Lack of encouragement to think imaginatively about the future
8. Lack of role models who think about the future
9. Lack of exposure to futures thinking methods
10. **Inability to see directions of change due to a lack of awareness of transformational forces**
11. **Rigid ideology or mindset**
12. Pop culture overly influences the types of possible futures one imagines
13. Lack of time needed for longer futures thinking process
14. **Neurological hindrances**

Barriers preventing people from engaging with futures with community failings highlighted from Futurist Imagination Retreat, May 3-4, 2016 (McGonigal, 2016b)

Half of the barriers, the emboldened ones, deal with problems with community members—their lack of hope, lack of agency, rigid ideology, fear, neurology, inability, and poor belief. The professional futurists never once considered that the problem might lie in their own White Futures methodologies. In fact, many of the futurists at the gathering use the Four-square game to first highlight and later address the barriers of workshop participants (Hayward & Candy, 2020; Polak, 1973) (Figure 1). If participants feel unempowered yet optimistic about the future, facilitators use forecasting to show the agency they could have due to the many possible futures. If participants feel unempowered and hopeless about the future, facilitators use simulations so participants can actually feel and experience different possible futures and sense their power to affect what happens. If participants feel they have agency but pessimistic about the future, facilitators focus on actions participants can take with their agency. If participants feel powerful and hopeful for the future, White futurists use gaming so participants bring others along.

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Figure 1. White Futures Four-square Game



Recreation of dimensions described by Polak that were placed into a grid by Hayward and Candy; I have overlain them with futures methodologies that futurists apply based on people's dimensions (Hayward & Candy, 2020; Polak, 1973)

In the world of Black Liberation, using the value system of Black Liberation Theology, there are two major problems with White Futures methodologies. First, White Futures methodologies were not created participatorily, like the participatory eschatology of Black Liberation Theology. Black Liberation Theology was not created by academia or elites and handed down to practitioners; Black Liberation Theology came from the people, the Christianity of enslaved people, the spirituals, the blues, the practices and ways of being of Africans in slavery and afterward (Cone, 2025, 2022). Black Liberation Theology future-making practices comes from the mixing of people, plants, animals, ecosystems, and God together. Instead of allowing the ways of being and knowing of a group to determine a futures practice, White futurists apply their own methodologies to people who have different ways of being, knowing, and valuing. Second, by treating hope as a gateway participants must pass through to practice futures, White futurists create an exclusive practice, violating the Black Liberation Theology ethic of becoming Black, an inclusive practice for Afro-descendant people at the bottom of a social hierarchy. James Cone said that in order to practice Christianity in the U.S. American context, you must become Black—meet people where they are, moving in solidarity with them, taking on their slings, bruises, arrows, pains, and goals as your own, exposing you to the same arrows. Instead, White Futurism asks people to become White—for community members to meet the professional where the professional futurist is, to take on urgent optimism, creative confidence, and hope. If people do not embrace the ethic of hope, they cannot become White and cannot practice Futurism, or their Futures work will be partial, wounded, inadequate.

Because White and Black are ontological, White futurists can be people of any color, race, or ethnicity that live solely in the ethics of hope and ask people and participants to become White regardless of their history and present. Do White futurists understand there are people who cannot see multiple futures, no matter the time horizon? Do futurists

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understand that when certain people look back, they cannot look forward (Table 2)? Do futurists know they exclude and ostracize people who literally have no hope?

AFROPESSIMISM AND AFRONIHILISM

Various people groups have experienced hopelessness across time and space. In the African diaspora, people have experienced hopelessness due to the cyclical traps of injustice like colonialism and neocolonialism that make justice seem impossible (Udoewa, 2024). In Black studies the experience of structural impossibility is called Afropessimism (Herrero & Wilderson, 2022; Wilderson, 2020; Patterson, 2018).

Afropessimism has several components. First, Blackness is a type of social death. Blackness is an ontological state of non-being, not just outside political life, but outside what it means to be human in Western modernity. The social death of people of African descent is produced by natal alienation, gratuitous violence, and general dishonor. Anti-Black violence is structural, not instrumental; the violence exists simply to reinforce the non-human status. Through natal alienation the enslaved African and their descendants have no recognized ancestry, no legitimate descendants or claims to land or family. Stripped of their culture, history, religion and ways of being, African people exist outside of genealogy itself. People of African descent cannot act dishonorably, lose honor, or transgress because the dishonor is inherent, embodied. They are already always transgressive. Thus, according to Afropessimist theory, anti-Black racism is ontologically distinct from other forms of oppression because it positions Black people as fundamentally outside the category of human, whereas other forms of dehumanization, including colonial slavery in Arab and Asian contexts, operate by degrading people who are still recognized as human subjects capable of redemption or restoration to full humanity (Wilderson, 2020, 2018). Slavery positioned Africans as tools or as property, a framework that still structures anti-Black racism, today.

Afropessimist scholar Wilderson shares a story where he consoles a Palestinian friend whose cousin accidentally died while making a bomb during the First Intifada (Wilderson, 2018). The friend shared that being searched at checkpoints was humiliating, but the worst humiliation was when the Israeli soldier was an Ethiopian Jew. This shares how African and Afro-descendant people occupy the same position of general dishonor in the collective unconscious of Arabs as the position occupied in the collective unconsciousness of white U.S. Americans. Even amid a Palestinian-Israeli war, the Palestinian insurgent has more in common with the Israeli state and its citizens than with African people. Both oppressor and oppressed hold an unconscious consensus on the positioning of Afro-descendant people as the locus of abjection that can be instrumentalized at any moment.

Second, anti-Blackness is foundational to global society (Busey & Coleman-King, 2023; Jung & Vargas, 2021; Huang, 2020; Chikaonda, 2020; Bledsoe & Wright, 2019; Wilderson, 2018; Tometi, 2017). Afro-descendant people experience anti-Black violence—gratuitous violence, familial alienation, and general dishonor—not for what they do, but for who they are. Third, Black Liberation through rights, reform, or inclusion is structurally foreclosed, implausible, or even impossible. Black Liberation can only be achieved through an apocalyptic rupture, ontological break, holistic transformation, or the end of the world.

Though Afropessimism has its critics, it is the lived and living understanding of real Afro-descendant people. The deep structural analysis of Afropessimism can even lead certain African diasporic people to the emotional reaction of Afronihilism (Warren, 2018).

Afronihilism is an existential and emotional response to Afropessimist system analysis. It has a few core components. Afronihilists or Black nihilists reject hope. They have no hope or faith

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in progress or liberation and critique weaker forms of Afropessimism that leave room for possible, but improbable, redemption. Afronihilists also embrace meaningless and nothingness even to the point of radical or existential despair. They accept that there is no ultimate meaning, purpose, or justice to this life and existence at all. They reject any construction of value or meaning under oppressive systems. Afronihilists also experience an existential crisis as part of their identity. Black life is life that is in continual confrontation with death, disregard, invisibility, and dehumanization.

How can a White Futures practice be useful to an Afropessimist or Afronihilist? Imagine running an equitable futures workshop with enslaved African women in the American colonies in 1685 using a 20 year time horizon. Imagine institutionalizing that workshop and repeating it every 20 years. Imagine, today in 2025, facilitating a White Futures workshop for African-American women in which you look back to look forward (Table 2). How could such an activity work? There are African-American women who would be demotivated by 340 years of little or no fundamental, structural progress. It is important to understand that the Afropessimistic critique is not saying that the system never changes; Afropessimism says that the position that Black people have in society has never changed and will never change. Even though slavery ended, it was followed by sharecropping, chain gangs, Black codes, vagrancy laws, and legalized apartheid in the U.S. American South, the era of terror—Jim and Jane Crow. Even though Jim and Jane Crow ended, it was followed by mass incarceration. The surface of the system changes, but the structure and outcomes remain the same in the lives of so many who experience a deep hopelessness (Udoewa, 2024). They are unmotivated by such White Futures practices.

THE ETHICS OF HOPELESSNESS

Instead of an exclusive White Futures practice of becoming white, or making Futures participants go through the door of the ethics of hope, futurists need to become Black. We need an ethic of hopelessness. We exclude so many people along the hope spectrum and continue the legacy of colonialism of one way of being, knowing, and futuring without an ethic of hopelessness.

Latin American Liberation theologian and ethicist Miguel de la Torre calls hope a privilege that assuages the egos of those at the top of a social hierarchy (2017). He calls for a theology of desperation that leads to hopelessness because when you are hopeless with nothing left to lose, you are forced to act. Unfortunately, that is not everyone's experience. There are many people experiencing hopelessness in impossible futures who are not motivated to act or paralyzed in despair.

In contrast, when I talk about the philosophy, theology, or ethics of hopelessness, I mean theology and ethics that are unconnected to hope. I am talking about ethics founded on something much deeper than traditional hope, so that even people without hope are animated by it. Is this not what we see in the U.S. Civil Rights movement of the 1960s? Civil rights activists did not say to themselves, "When we protest by sitting down at the segregated lunch counter, the servers will see the errors of their ways and change their minds and serve us." They did not think when they conducted a protest march to a capitol building that governors and legislators would see the value of their movement and the justice they embodied. No, it was the opposite. Through training, civil rights activists prepared for beatings, water hosing, dog attacks, and imprisonment. They were taught what to do when White people and authority figures said no and fought, beat, and abused them. They expected not to receive what they longed for—liberation.

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To be clear, they still had goals for Black and lower class liberation. In fact, the movement employed tacticians and strategists like Reverend James Lawson (Limbo, 2006). The activists, however, were not motivated by whether or not they could achieve the goal, whether the goal was possible. They had a slogan—we will not stop, until we succeed (Lakey, 2018). This means if we do not succeed, we will not stop; if we never succeed, we never stop. This slogan is in stark contrast to the burnout that certain contemporary social justice activists experience. Week after week, month after month, year after year, if such social justice activists see no change or movement toward the goal, they burn out. This happens because they are motivated by the goal itself. Once the goal is impossible, they lose energy, motivation, and hope.

An ethic of hopelessness functions differently. Because it is not based on the possibility of reaching the goal or hope, it is an inclusive ethic that invites the hopeful, the hope-unsure, the hope-ambivalent, and the hopeless—even those who believe the goal will never be achieved. With an ethic of hopelessness, we, Afro-descendant people, do not do what we do because we have hope. We do what we do because that is what integrity says we do. With an ethic of hopelessness, we do not do what we do because we believe we will see the outcome we want, we do what we do because it is the right thing to do. We do what we do because we want our children to look at us knowing we died doing the right thing. With an ethic of hopelessness, we do not do what we do because we believe we will achieve our goal, we do what we do because that is what dignity looks like. With an ethic of hopelessness, we do not do what we do because we have hope, we do what we do because that is what love does.

A great Afro-Caribbean prophet embodies this sentiment when she proclaims “We found love in a hopeless place” (Rihanna, 2011). If love is there, one might think it is not a hopeless, but hopeful, place. But it is the very conditions of hopelessness that allow love to show its integrity, steadfastness, and presence not conditioned by hope. We see this experience, even stronger, in the words of one of the greatest African-American prophets (Houston, 1985).

I decided long ago

Never to walk in anyone's shadows

If I fail, if I succeed

At least I'll live as I believe

No matter what they take from me

They can't take away my dignity

Lyrics from “The Greatest Love of All” (Houston, 1985)

Here, we see hope has nothing to do with the actions of the singer or songwriter. She is motivated not by success, but by dignity, living as she believes. This type of freedom is not a goal, but a way of being. In other words, the ethics of hopelessness embodies an onto-liberationality—liberation as a way of being, not a destination, and not a direct fight against oppression.

With an ethic of hopelessness, the energy, motivation, and sustenance for liberatory work does not depend on the outcome. From a Black Liberation Theology perspective, liberation or liberatory work is not about winning or an analysis of the odds of winning (Cone, 2020, 2019). For example, I can have zero success and still not experience burnout. This is because

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my energy and motivation do not come from outcomes and results, but from living in alignment with my values, doing the right thing, embodying dignity, and doing what love does. Liberation is not a goal or a gift given to the oppressed; someone is free when they accept responsibility for their own acts. Liberation is a way of being. Though I may be beaten, bruised, jailed, or dying, I have the energy to move forward, in the mixed community of the hopeless, hope-unsure, and hopeful. For it is in community, even of the hopeless, “that values are chosen, because the community provides the structure in which our being as persons is realized” (Cone, 2020, p. 103).

The ethics of hopelessness highlights the difference between faith and belief and their relationship to doubt. A person can fully doubt, fully lack belief in an impossible future, and still move forward in faith, putting their trust in a community that carries values of love, dignity, and justice, trusting that movement toward an impossibility is the best way to live, the right way to live. Faith can be present in the absence of belief. Faith builds upon doubt, through relational trust.

The ethics of hopelessness is innervated with a doubt-rich spirituals ritual, a blues sensibility, and a jazz spirituality. The spirituals of enslaved Africans were not about escapist hope in a future Heaven. Enslaved Africans sometimes sang of Heaven, signifying an actual place up north where they could escape and live free. More significantly, Heaven was a means of experiencing a transcendent present, today. In other words, the spirituals were not just about freedom from bondage, but, more crucially, freedom in bondage, even if they had no hope their situation would change in this life (Cone, 2025). This is a blues sensibility for the blues do not express hope in a future happiness and liberation. The blues are the lived experience of people wrestling with the contradictions of society. Yet, the blues are a refusal to be conquered by that society, the assertion, similar to the spirituals, to be in the face of forces that wish to declare the non-being of African peoples. A blues sensibility is the practice of self-affirmation through song with no hope for a change in the situation. The liberation is not in the material change but in a way of being with no resolution. The lack of resolution is also a jazz spirituality. Ellington said “Dissonance is our way of life. We are something apart, yet an integral part” (Matlin, 2022; Jones, 2015). In a Western, classical world, jazz does not resolve (Miller, 2012). Yet, in the world of African-Americans, jazz does resolve; the dissonance is a way of life. Liberation is never a destination that is reached, it is a way of living with dignity in spite of not resolving or hoping for the destination. We live in the blue, the unresolved, the dissonant. This way of being at home is a liberatory way of being.

While the tyranny of hope represents deficit-based thinking, an ethic of hopelessness paves the way to transformative, asset-based futures. To illustrate the asset-based aspect of the ethics of hopelessness, we can look at the intersectionality of Black Disability studies. With a deficit-based understanding of disability, nondisabled White futurists often imagine a world in which technology eliminates all disability because disability is not consistent with utopic futurity (Woodcock 2009; Gleeson, 2005, 1998). With an asset-based ethic of hopelessness, we do not hope for a future in which a deficit is fixed or disability ceases to exist. In community with able-bodied and disabled groups of color who experience the social construction of disability, we understand there is no future without disability. Disability is a normal part of life and inextricably linked to the experience of life as people move in and out of different abilities across their life. Also, intersectionally, disability is reified by socio-political dynamics including social oppression, especially for Black, Indigenous, and people of color (Foreman-Murray, 2022; Frederick & Shifrer, 2019). Technology even further constructs disability (MacDonald & Clayton, 2017; Moser, 2006; Goggin & Newell, 2003). Instead of hoping for a future without disability, in an asset-based intersectional approach of hopelessness, “dreaming of a Black disabled future is a radical act” and a liberatory way of being (Drew & Wortham, 2021, p. 51).

CONCLUSION

This is the third paper in a paper series focused on learnings from Black Liberation work. In the first paper, we explored a brief introduction to a healing-centered framework that defined system trauma (Udoewa, 2023). In part II, we shared learning from specific system traps, or system trauma responses, in Black Liberation (Udoewa, 2024). This third paper explores how these consistent traps and entanglements in Black Liberation work affect the future orientation and emotional outlook of social justice workers, Black Liberation workers, and Afro-descendant people particularly.

We explored Black Liberation Theology as a lens through which we viewed the ethics of HCD and White Futures. We found that HCD and White Futures carry explicit ethics of hope, agency, and optimism in their values, mindsets, principles, and methods. Hope functions as a gateway requirement in order to practice HCD and White Futures, making them exclusive methodologies that embody a practice of becoming white—requiring community members and participants to become like the futurists and designers and their world. This violates the inclusive participatory eschatology of Black Liberation Theology. More importantly it violates the Black Liberation Theology value of becoming Black. To be free, you must become Black—become linked in solidarity with people at the bottom of the social hierarchy putting yourself in the same position, ready to face the same slings, arrows, and blows. In other words, futurists and designers should instead become Black and meet people where they are instead of creating exercises to train people to have more optimism, agency, and hope. The practice of becoming White and training represents a mistaken approach of empowerment, a type of white male saviorism model (Udoewa, 2022a, 2022b). Community members do not need to be empowered which simply reinforces the power of the privileged. Instead, professional futurists need to let go of power and privilege as community members empower themselves. Professional futurists must use a relational approach of humbling themselves, building solidarity and vulnerable, sustainable relations with people at the bottom of a social hierarchy, with no goal (Udoewa & Gress, 2023).

Through Afropessimism and Afronihilism, we saw that there are people in the African diaspora who simply have no hope at all and find no meaning in this life in this current order in the social system in which we find ourselves. The futures they desire are impossible; the system will never allow it. How can or do they engage in futures when they are excluded from a White Futures practice that requires hope and agency? We explored how, in contrast to an ethic of hope, the ethic of hopelessness is an ethic that does not depend on hope at all. Inclusive of all relationships to hope—hope-unsure, hopeful, hope-indifferent, hopeless—the ethic of hopelessness is an ethic that moves people to action based on integrity, dignity, doing the right thing, right relationship with ancestors and descendants, and ultimately love.

The ethics of hopelessness in impossible futures is infused with a spirituals rituality, a blues sensibility, and a jazz spirituality. It is the rhythm and soul of a people who have learned to live with a limp, in the blue, without resolution, with dissonance. This is liberation as a way of being—ontoliberationality. Our hope is not in resolution or liberation as a destination or goal as in the Western, colonial world. Rather, we walk in hopelessness, but still walk, based on the assets we have—dignity, love, and justice. In this way, we are already liberated.

If people are already liberated, then the work of White futurists is not to save. As stated earlier, the work is to let go of the tyranny of hope, the ethics of hope; the work is to stop asking people to become White; the work is ultimately to engage in inclusive futuring. This means White futurists must let go and let others lead, community members control the work and methodology (Udoewa, 2022a, 2022b). The work is to practice futures in a way that

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makes space for people across the entire hope spectrum—the hope-indifferent, the hope-ambivalent, the hopeful, the hopeless. The work is to become Black, to become hopeless.

But what does a futures practice based on the ethics of hopelessness in impossible futures look like? What frameworks or tools are used in such a practice? If Afro-descendant people who walk with the ethics of hopelessness are not preoccupied with impossible futures, what is the focus of their futures practice? How is time different in such a practice? These are future research directions and questions to explore next, focusing on what a possible Black Liberation Futures practice toward impossible futures looks like.

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