

Ferguson is the Future

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I. The facts, alone,
will not save us

Ferguson
is the
FUTURE



VIEW
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As the rebellion following the murder of 18-year old Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri was underway in the of summer 2015, with numerous images and videos of the uprising circulating online, there was one particular that captured my attention. It showed a wall with the words “Ferguson is the Future” spray-painted on the side. A future, I wondered, of militarized police who terrorize residents using technologies of war, or a future of courageous citizens who demand justice and dignity using technologies of communication? The uncertainty, I think, is what we make of it.

In the midst of this social crisis, where even the most basic assertion that black lives matter is contested, we are drowning in “the facts” of inequality and injustice. Whether it is a new study on criminal justice disparities or another video of police brutality, demanding empirical evidence of systematic wrongdoing can have a kind of perverse quality. As if subjugated people must petition again and again for admission in to the category “human,” for which empathy is rationed and applications are routinely denied.

In such a context, novel fictions that reimagine and rework all that is taken for granted about the current structure of the social world—alternatives to capitalism, racism, and patriarchy—are urgently needed. Fictions, in this sense, are not falsehoods but refashionings, through which analysts experiment with different scenarios, trajectories, and reversals, elaborating new values and testing different possibilities for creating more just and equitable societies. Such fictions are

not meant to convince others of *what is*, but to expand our own visions of what is *possible*.

This is not to say that imagining alternatives is sufficient, or that all things possible are even desirable. But how will we know if we do not routinely push the boundaries of our own thinking, which include the stories we tell about the social world? In the words of historian Robin D.G. Kelley,

We must tap the well of our own collective imaginations, that we do what earlier generations have done: dream... Without new visions we don't know what to build, only what to knock down. We not only end up confused, rudderless, and cynical but we forget that making a revolution is not a series of clever maneuvers and tactics but a process that can and must *transform us*.¹

Building upon this insight, the following narrative sketch is an experiment to know things differently, a way to reflect anew about the themes of my research—innovation, inequity, biotechnology, and race among them—and, ultimately, to explore the relationship between racial fictions and biological facts. How do narratives about the inherent difference between groups impact social policies and normative practices? Does a focus on treating disparities in health support *or* substitute for broader social transformations? How might we reimagine the relationship between social and biological processes in a way that is non-deterministic, but

¹ Kelley, 2003: xii; my emphasis.

still take seriously how inequality gets under the skin and causes premature death?

It was with these sorts of questions in mind that I finished my first book, *People's Science: Bodies and Rights on the Stem Cell Frontier*, which examines the social dimensions of biotechnology through the prism of the California Stem Cell Research and Cures Initiative. Towards the end of the revision process, I was finally able to articulate the question that I now recognize as the heart of the project: *why is it that we can imagine growing cardiac cells in a lab, but not growing empathy for other human beings in our everyday lives?* For many people, the idea that we can defy politics as usual and channel human ingenuity toward more cooperative and inclusive forms of social organization is utterly far-fetched. Thus I am convinced that we must query this faith in biological regeneration alongside an underdeveloped investment in social transformation. *If our bodies can regenerate, why do we perceive our body politic as so utterly fixed?*

The speculative exercise in this volume is an attempt to perceive otherwise, to hold myself accountable to the query buried in *People's Science*, to formulate a critique at the power/knowledge nexus through narrative, and ultimately to construct new fictions, though not without their own tensions and limitations, alongside social facts. Throughout, it is my aim to take the notion of *sociological imagination* seriously, and envisage a not-too-distant future where race, science, and subjectivity are reconfigured differently, defiantly, and hope-fully.

*Your people will change.
Your young will be more like us and ours more like you.
Your hierarchical tendencies will be modified and
if we learn to regenerate limbs and reshape our bodies,
We'll share those abilities with you.
That's part of the trade.
We're overdue for it.*

—Octavia Butler, from *Dawn*²



II: Ferguson is the Future

There it was again: “Lights, hammer, action.”

Just as the lightning was about to strike, Aiyana wrestled herself awake. Chest pounding and sweat circling her neck, she struggled to make out what happened. Footsteps overhead. Channels flipping. Smothered voices. And lightning, always lightning headed directly towards her forehead.

The Humanity+ counselor kept telling her not to worry. “Chronic dreams are perfectly normal, a symptom from the previous life. They’ll fade with time. *Here*, I’ll double your dose.”

But it’s been ten years, and they only had become more vivid.

“Lights, *camera*, action!” Aiyana heard it clearly this time. A film crew was shooting her while she slept. That made no sense. Unless of course entertainment executives had started mining people’s inner lives, piped dreams, because reality had become so unbearably stale. Gossip, fight, screw, shop, backstab, on endless repeat. No doubt they would plunder the dreams of seventeen-year-old girls like her to create newfangled surreality shows.

Stuffing her head under the pillow to avoid the crawl of sunlight across the room, Aiyana’s thoughts continued to drift – For all their high tech gadgets, why hadn’t the Humanity+ engineers created a better antidote for these leftover lives? How hard could it be to develop some kinda neural vacuum to suck up memory crumbs? After all, there must

be side effects to *almost* getting struck by lightning night after night. Maybe that was the point...

Just then the bank alarm vibrated across Aiyana’s wrist. A third break-in attempt this month. She sat up, dizzy, and hooked into her chair so fast that she knocked the stack of reGeneration event flyers off her nightstand:

*Whoever said time heals
Never had a tumor
Growing inside their belly
Mistaken for a child.*

As many times as she read it, it was no less disturbing. Why devise such a morbid slogan for the occasion, one meant to inspire? Dead babies for god sake! People’s Science Council really needed a new PR team.

Annoyed, Aiyana tapped her wrist to check on the rest of her team while she rushed out of the door. The only other people moving around Grand Ave so early on a Saturday were the market vendors who were vying for the best spots to make it easier to unload. She could already smell the curry potatoes simmering at the roti stand, torture when she can’t stop for some. Soon drummers from all over the Bay would make their way over for what seemed like hours and hours of conversation without words.

If she had more time, Aiyana would stop by Ixchel’s coffee stand, but in the distance she could see the first burst of orange and fuchsia over Lake Merritt.

She pressed the accelerate option on her chair, sped past all the pedestrians confined to their legs, over the water through downtown Oakland, and over the Oscar Grant Memorial Bridge until she reached the SF bioDistrict.³ It never got old—how commuters glanced at her with that mix of envy and amazement. “Oakland’s Very Own Shuri!” exclaimed the Wakanda-inspired headlines. By now you’d think people would be used to it.

#StemCellsMatter

As usual, Aiyana arrived first at the bank. She circled the perimeter a few times, ensuring all the cryotanks were secure, and collected footage from the bank’s eye. As she made her way towards the atrium, she glanced out one of the floor to ceiling windows that extended the length of the hallway, and saw that the wall near the highway exit was tagged. It was one of those illicit ads popping up all around the Bay:

*Are you a victim of reverse regeneration?
Get exactly what you deserve on the
white market.*

*Two for one special—livers, kidneys, hearts,
grown to order.*

More like mass-produced using pig and cow parts, she thought. Raiders, it seemed, were becoming more and more relentless as the 50th reGeneration drew closer, trying to capitalize on the excitement and anxiety surrounding the Ferguson Anniversary.

³ The phrase “confined to your legs” is from disability studies scholar Gregor Wolbring (2003).

How long until they figured out that stem cells were not the only living things being kept alive in the banks?

Aiyana glanced once more at the makeshift advertisement. The raiders’ signature—two scalpels in the shape of an “X”—was missing? *Great.* Now we have copycats running around selling chimera organs to anyone who either couldn’t afford the real deal or didn’t qualify under the Reparations Act. And copycat or not, she couldn’t figure out how any of these taggers managed to avoid getting recorded.

Just then the rest of her team reeled in to the atrium, already in heated debate. One of the things she loved about them – they didn’t care one iota about being loud *and* black in public.

“This reverse regeneration backlash is off the rails! Even so-called allies who backed the Reparations Act are saying that the Council has lost touch.” Rekia’s tone barely concealed her agreement with the criticism.

“It’s desperation mixed with greed,” Tamir quipped. “The worst of all possible combos.”

Aiyana couldn’t tell if he was talking about the raiders or the Council, or maybe it was all the same. The line between those who hoard power and those who crave it, was not at all clear.

“I think it’s economics more than ideology”, Freddie interrupted. “Have you all been keeping track of white

market prices? The street value of cells is off the charts!” He had a point. And even stories of people dropping dead from those chimera transplants were not driving down the prices.

One thing they could agree on, it was getting harder to predict what new scheme raiders would employ. Surveillance footage turned up nothing. As Aiyana ran through a checklist of the security matrix, considering all the possible ways it could be hacked, Director Lacks rushed in to the atrium, breathless. “How could this have happened *again*?!”

Aiyana reassured her that everything had been reinforced. None of the cryotanks had been touched. All of the tissue had been accounted for, including the ErGa cell lines needed for tomorrow’s Revival ceremony.

“Wake up, Wake up, Wake up!”

To mark the 50th Anniversary of the Ferguson uprising, the People’s Science Council was working around the clock to revive one Mr. Eric Garner, the father of six who was choked to death by NYPD officers in 2014. Holding him in cryosleep until all the necessary procedures could be honed, the Council was confident that Garner could be resuscitated without incident.

Aiyana wasn’t so sure. She hinted as much to Director Lacks, who was unwavering. Had the Garner family even been consulted—half a dozen grandchildren and a few great grands—all conspicuously silent

about what the Council had planned? Lacks of all people should care about keeping kin in the know.

Lo and behold, soon after Aiyana raised the question, there was a press conference—smiling relatives, congenial scientists, a bronze bust of the soon-to-awake Garner, a scholarship fund, and heart-wrenching interviews with family members who seemed genuinely excited.

Still, Aiyana was uneasy. Garner’s last words, “I can’t breathe”, had served as a clarion call for five decades of movement building, so it seemed fitting that he would be revived for the anniversary. Assuming, of course, that the multiple transplants worked. A lot could go wrong. Infections, graft failure, cancers. If successful, he would be the first adult to successfully undergo Doubling—resuscitation and organ renewal. Only children like Aiyana had survived up until that point, and even then, not without complication.

On the spectrum, Aiyana’s nightmares were barely considered side effects. But she knew better. Sometimes headaches are just headaches. Sometimes they’re past lives knocking on your door.

Humanity+

Aiyana Mo’Nay Stanley-Jones, killed by a Detroit SWAT Team in 2010, was the only person who had survived Doubling without debilitating side effects. But she was a child at the time, seven years old

when an officer threw a flash grenade where she lay sleeping on her grandmother's couch. A reality TV crew was shooting the raid as officers shot Aiyana in the head.

When the Council woke Aiyana up from cryosleep in 2054 and implanted a new heart, lungs, and spine, at first there was only a minor graft rejection which transplant specialists were able to control. But as she went through puberty, then came the seizures, blackouts, and hallucinations, usually involving nocturnal lightning strikes. Being born again was more like purgatory than heaven on earth.

But with a grant from the Humanity+ Foundation, Aiyana's transplant team designed the first of its kind Chairperson™—an apparatus that maintained internal homeostasis so she no longer experienced the original side effects. It also included augmentations, like the ability to hover up to 40mph on land or water and an acute sensitivity to electrical fields, which enhanced her ability to communicate, orient to her surroundings, track things, and protect herself.

What Aiyana considered its coolest feature was that the chair grew as *she* did. Humanity+ engineers harnessed the elastic properties of melanin with a new 3D printing method that took synthetic biology to a whole new level. Not only did Chairperson™ run on solar energy given its melanin substructure, but it literally never got old. Which is why Aiyana's closest friend, Sandra, loved to tease, "I guess it's true what they say, *cyborg blacks don't crack...*"

Still, Aiyana's life after Doubling was no Wakanda Wonderland, even with the gold standard in second life starter kits. Mr. Garner, by contrast, was not only an adult, but the first to require multiple regenerated organs a half-century after his first life was stolen. Waking up would be just the beginning.

Sandra

Aiyana was gliding up the ramp of the People's Science Council building on Mission Street when she heard someone calling her name.

"Heyyy *Madame* Chairperson, wait up! Ms. Jones, wait up!" It was Sandra. "How long you think this meeting is going to take?"

"Not more than an hour, I hope. The Revival organizers have to finish setting up, so they shouldn't keep us long."

"Well, as soon as it's over, there's something I need to tell you", whispered Sandra.

As Aiyana and Sandra walked in the glass front doors, the welcome hologram seemed louder than usual, the history of the Council and its achievements on blast:

The Reparations initiative, now in its tenth year, covers the costs of regenerative medicine for victims of police brutality. Scientists honed a technique in which they

take a mature human cell from a patient and reprogram it to create any other tissue in the body. And because the regenerated tissue is produced from a person's own cells, they avoid complications that arise with donor cells. Over 10,000 people have undergone this suite of procedures, and nearly all have survived.

As she and Sandra walked through the exhibition halls, waiting for the meeting to begin, Aiyana couldn't help think about when news first broke about the reprogramming technique. Millions of families actually started banking their own skin cells – a kind of insurance policy.

That was before the Reparations initiative led to the official disbanding of police. The era of “every 6 hours”– children playing cops and robbers shot down on playgrounds, teenagers goofing off with toy guns left bleeding in department store aisles, mentally ill adults treated with multiple shots to the head, mowed down for walking, driving, breathing out of place. Phones, wallets, and other objects allegedly mistaken for weapons.

Not to mention all the residual damage – the chronic stress of living under siege. Every public school teacher assigned a police escort. Students body slammed daily for having “too much attitude”. Classmates, terrified, pretending not to notice. Kids as young as six with chronic hypertension.

The Council headquarters devoted an entire floor to

the history of de-carceration. A holographic exhibit with vintage footage from police body cams, smart phones, and TV crews played nonstop. As Aiyana and Sandra passed the glass cases that displayed Amadou Diallo's wallet, Stephon Clark's cell phone, and numerous other objects supposedly mistaken for weapons, Aiyana looked on with disgust. It always troubled her, not just the section presenting her own murder, but the whole idea of playing and replaying black death, the pornography of genocide on constant loop.⁴ *Why*, in fact, do we need to see to believe?

The building's voiceover continued:

When police were forced to wear body cameras in 2015, the non-indictments flowed even more freely. They were, after all, responding as they had been trained. “It was never meant to be a fair fight.” “Non-lethal force isn't in our repertoire.” To indict individual officers would be to admit that the entire apparatus was defective. The Council dubbed victims of police violence “A-Is”, as in, Attached Incident – their way of countering the fictional notion that these were isolated acts of violence. Eventually the staggering number of A-Is created a boon for the biobanking sector. Whereas anyone who could afford it could get a transplant, only certified A-Is were

⁴ From, “The inhumanity of ‘Fuck your breath’ should stop all of us cold” by Steven W. Thrasher in the Guardian April 13, 2015. The full quote is, “To better document the pornography of our genocide?”

completely covered under the Reparations Act of 2035.

Slowly replacing the college fund common in the early part of the century, parents and grandparents now opened tissue accounts for their loved ones.

The hologram replaced images of the People's Science Council at the signing of the Reparations Act with the old billboards that ran over highways: "Don't cell your family short! Bank with us today!" Although most of the transplant procedures were far too expensive for the average person, monthly payment plans were manageable for most families.

Sandra and Aiyana found their way back to the main atrium just as a public service announcement began:

*Your ancestors fueled the New World economy,
Just as mitochondria power the cellular body.
Harness your history, transform the biopolity!
Come in for a free consultation to see if
Middle Passage Mitochondria
Is right for you.*

Informed Dissent

Why was it taking so long for Council members to come down for the meeting? Sandra, usually overflowing with news from the weekend, just kept looking intently in the direction of the welcome

hologram. Aiyana barely noticed that she was inching closer and closer, until their elbows touched. "I can't wait anymore. There's something I have to tell you, Aiyana."

"What is it?"

"You know the 6th floor?", Sandra asked.

"You mean the floor they've been renovating since Malia Obama was president," Aiyana said with a smirk. "What about it?"

"Well, it doesn't need renovating." Sandra lowered her voice even more, "That's the raiders' office."

"Uh huh," Aiyana snickered, expecting Sandra to embellish this tall tale, and thankful for the entertainment while they waited. But Sandra wasn't smiling. And the look in her eye caused Aiyana's spine to tighten.

"What are you saying, Sandra?" she asked intently.

"I'm saying—" she paused. A group of elementary school students visiting the de-carceration museum shuffled past. "I'm saying that the raiders, who you've been chasing for three years, work for the Council. Or more precisely, the council *created* the raiders..."

"But *why*?"

"Distraction..." replied Sandra.

“Distraction from *what?*” probed Aiyana. Her nagging itch, which had always told her there was more going on than Director Lacks let on, turned in to a sensory rash. The nodes connecting her spine and chair pulsed so hard she could feel her lungs expand and blood rushing to her extremities.

But before Sandra could respond, council members filed out of the elevator and towards the conference room.

“After we’re done here, meet me at the abandoned testing station on the corner of 24th and Mission,” whispered Sandra as they trailed in behind the group. “But go up Van Ness and use the entrance next to the old BART platform.”

Only half listening to the discussion, Aiyana turned Sandra’s words over and over. If she was right, it would explain how white market advertisements turned up all over the city, without raiders getting caught. And how, despite the resources at Aiyana’s disposal, they always seemed out of reach. But, *then*, what was the real threat?

About an hour later, the meeting ended and Sandra headed out of the headquarters. Aiyana made the usual rounds, checking in with council members and updating her team about their respective tasks at the Revival. After about thirty minutes she glided out the front door towards Van Ness.

This was white market central. Raider tags were everywhere, offering major organ discounts. As

she headed towards 24th, her thoughts turned to the abandoned testing station where Sandra was waiting for her.

By the time the health establishment finally came to grips with the source of most illness, it was nearly too late. The precision medical industry’s lobbyists had successfully amended ObamaCare, establishing mandatory gene-testing stations alongside all health clinics. Even if you just wanted your blood pressure checked, you had to get your genome mapped first. So if you didn’t know yours, forget about being treated. And if you couldn’t afford a test, you were just out of luck.

Meanwhile, counterfeiting operations that specialized in genome maps flourished. The fact that people were buying knock-off maps to get access to treatments defeated the whole point of precision medicine. It wasn’t until 2035, when the People’s Science Council was established, that officials begin addressing the chronic strain of living under siege. And they were still trying to figure out what to do with all the abandoned testing stations.

Before Aiyana turned the corner on 24th, she looked behind her one more time, then went down the ramp towards the BART platform. She knocked on the metal door, and after three or four long seconds, Sandra opened it.

“So listen. The Revival is tomorrow and you only have one chance to get this right.”

“Get *what* right?” Aiyana asked.

“Think about it, Aiyana. When did you first hear about the raiders?”

It was the week of the elections. And it didn't look like the Reparations Act was going to pass.

“Don't you think it's odd how these biobank attacks are always one step ahead? And notice how they always seem to follow the death of a transplant survivor, or at least the *public* ones that get people asking whether these “free” procedures for police brutality victims are really what they are made out to be.”

“What are you saying, Sandra?!”

“Distraction! The raiders are manufactured distraction. There is no white market. There is only the People's Science Council honing these techniques on the backs of police brutality victims 'for free.' Once they sort out all the kinks involved in bringing people back to life, Doubling will require a stringent screening process given overpopulation. They'll abandon the free treatments. The People's Science Council will give way to the Immortocracy.”

“What's the Immortocracy?” Aiyana asked, impatiently.

“An elite class that lives forever. Immortals, or so they hope. They have everything life has to offer, except the pesky problem of death keeps getting in the way. But so far, the procedures have been too risky. They

needed a long-term plan to hone them. Hence the Reparations Act, a moral prophylactic for what they really have planned.”

Stunned, Aiyana asked, “And *I'm* supposed to stop this?”

“Unless you can get a message to Mr. Garner before the curtain falls on this elaborate charade, those faux-populists at the People's Science headquarters win. Their plan relies on Garner's successful Doubling. And as long as he plays his part, parroting the script they give him—a celebrity spokesman for their immortality products—the Revival will usher in a new caste system.”

Off-script

He stood on the stage, clapping turning to a hum as Dr. Lacks began her introduction. Eric twisted in his suit ever so slightly, the lining loose in places, bunching in others. Rushed, he thought. Everything was rushed. Death. Life. And now this three-piece suit. Not even his style. But the grand kids seemed so excited, that he couldn't say no. So there he stood, with an inner lining doing what it wanted.

Trying to ignore the discomfort, he glanced once more at the script his handler had him practice. “Special thanks to the people's science council for organizing this incredible Revival, the Mayor of San Francisco, Brisenia Flores, the Director of the Trayvon Martin Biobank, Dr. Henrietta Lacks, and all the sponsors—bioMed, bioHead, bioLimb, bioLung...” Just then, a

thunderous applause erupted in the Giants-Google stadium! He was up.

Mr. Garner smiled and waved, just as his handler had reminded, took a sip of water, and stared down at the script. His new heart beating loudly. Murdered by the hands of police, born again by the hands of scientists, he thought, *both without asking*.

Off-script, he began, *Who will pay reparations on my soul?*⁵

*There is never time in the future
in which we will work out our salvation.
The challenge is in the moment.
The time is always now.
—James Baldwin⁶*

⁵ This line is from an essay by Jesse McCarthy, available at <http://thepointmag.com/2014/politics/reparations-on-my-soul/>; accessed July 27, 2016.

⁶ From James Baldwin: Collected Essays (1998) p. 214

III: Imagination and Extinction

middle passage mitochondria



While a growing body of recent work explores the relationship between social science and fiction, W.E.B. Du Bois' short story, *The Comet* (1920), offers one of the earliest experiments with what I am calling speculative methods.⁷ Set in a dystopian world where the racial status quo is momentarily overturned, it underscores the importance of storytelling in scholarly and civic praxis. The direct link he crafted between sociology and speculative fiction suggests the need for windows into alternative realities, even if it is just a glimpse, to challenge ever-present narratives of inevitability as it relates to both technology and society. Stories remind us that the beginning, middle, and the end could all be otherwise: "Whenever we try to envision a world without war, without violence, without prisons, without capitalism, we are engaging in speculative fiction. All organizing is science fiction" (Imarisha 2015: 3).

If race is a kind of technology, one that as I suggest creates parallel social universes and premature death, then it requires routine maintenance and upgrade. What, then, are some of the features of NextGen Racism? Homemade nooses are upgraded for state-issued firearms. Violent voter intimidation tactics are replaced with voter ID laws. Government-sanctioned redlining is succeeded by predatory lending. Top down eugenic policies give way to reproductive technologies that allow consumers to select "socially desirable" traits. These postracial upgrades appear necessary and

even empowering, which is precisely what make them so effective at exacerbating inequality.

Rigorously tested and retested, so racism downloads consistently, *intuitively*: the officer "felt threatened and...fired his weapon," even though we later learn after watching a video of the incident that the victim was unarmed and running away, and that the officer planted a weapon on the suspect to fabricate threat (Legum 2015). As Goldberg aptly notes, the impulse to eliminate racial threats is euphemized as "natural preservation":

This means that racisms are not inevitable or expressive of some transcendental human nature. But it suggests also that their *supposed* inevitability – the self-licensing to purge a racially framed people as a "natural" entailment of human self-preservation – is politically projected in specific social contexts (138).

Racial technologies, in other words, are in the business of manufacturing natures. As with the fabrication of urban green spaces, postracial environments are ones in which the pleasure of some is predicated on the displacement of others. Like those signs that litter public streets, "No Standing Anytime," this is an ideology of forward motion, always on the go, no loitering, lest one begin to reflect or remember that you were forcibly dislocated to make space for urban renewal. Those who dwell, whether to assert rights or seek redress, are accused of wrongdoing, of imposing artificial

⁷ A version of this section was previously published as Benjamin (2016).

equality onto those who, *naturally*, only want to revitalize the neighborhood.

These are amnesic-inducing technologies, *No Remembering Anytime*. At the genius bar racist devices are reset with zero megabytes of memory, a “denial of denial...the vanishing point of race” (Goldberg 2015, 75). In this way it is a kind of racial minimalism that allows for more and more racist violence to be less and less discernable. Consider the nomenclature around *micro*-aggressions, obscuring as it does the way racism gets under the skin and into the placenta, restricting blood flow so that black American babies are disproportionately born premature due to the accumulation of stress and strain shouldered by expectant mothers. These “micro” chips accumulate in the seemingly soft wear and tear that exposes black lives to death... even before birth. The stealthy language of racial minimalism is essential to postracial upgrades, allowing it to penetrate every facet of social life, lethally undetected.

Technology, I suggest, is not only a metaphor for innovating inequity. It is, in fact, one of the most effective conduits for Remaking Race™. Whether in the context of public health or border control, brain scans to test the impulsivity of parolees or genetic ancestry analysis to adjudicate the stories of asylum seekers, postracial racism is itself a kind of speculative fiction-cum-futurism.

Forgetting racial pasts becomes essential to projecting essentialist differences in to the future

without the charge of racism. Cloaked in postracial packaging, racial logics no longer seem backward and dangerous; rather, they are a kind of biological *branding*—think: boardroom not plantation.

Consider historian Lundy Braun’s analysis in *Breathing Race into the Machine* (2014), which examines how “cultural notions of race became embedded in the architecture of an apparently ordinary instrument”, the spirometer. She discusses the widespread implications of this process from research design to clinical interactions to medical school training to insurance claims. With respect to the latter, in 1999, the world’s largest insulation manufacturer tried to limit disability claims in a class-action lawsuit brought by 15,000 asbestos workers, by drawing upon the long-standing belief among pulmonologists that racial groups differed in the capacity and the function of their lungs. Drawing upon the widely accepted practice of “race correction”—so normalized that there is a button for it on the spirometer, the company made it more difficult for black workers to qualify for workers’ compensation.

Indeed, postracialism is a kind of social insurance policy against accusations of racism. How convenient it is when black breathlessness can be attributed to an unfortunate biological predisposition, measured by the spirometer, and not to the deadly chokehold of a Long Island police officer who refused to heed his victim’s plea, “I Can’t Breathe.” As Goldberg reminds us, “US Congressman Steve King insisted that Eric Garner’s death by

police strangulation was caused by his own obesity and asthma..." (44). The idea of biological race, in short, is the ever-ready "not guilty" plea of structural racism.

Whether it is in the architecture of machines like the spirometer, or in the architecture of legal technologies, different forms of "race correction" underwrite a pernicious form of knowledge construction. Consider a recent court decision in the case against one Mr. Henry Davis, who was charged with destruction of property for bleeding on police uniforms *after* officers incorrectly identified him as having an outstanding warrant and then beat him in to submission:

On and/or about the 20th day of Sept. 20, 2009 at or near 222 S. Florissant within the corporate limits of Ferguson, Missouri, the above named defendant did then and there unlawfully commit the offense of 'property damage' to wit did transfer blood to the uniform.⁸

When Davis sued the officers, the judge tossed out the case, saying, "... a reasonable officer could have believed that beating a subdued and compliant Mr. Davis while causing a concussion, scalp lacerations, and bruising with almost no permanent damage, did not violate the Constitution."⁹ The Judge, in short, "race corrected" our reading of the U.S. Constitution

8 Daly, Michael. "The Day Ferguson Cops Were Caught in a Bloody Lie." *The Daily Beast*, 8/15/14

9 Daly 2014

as inapplicable to the likes of Mr. Davis—a reminder that whatever else we think racism is, it is not simply ignorance, or a *not* knowing.

Until we come to grips with the *reasonableness* of racism, we will continue to look for it in on the bloody floors of Charleston churches and in the dashboard cameras on Texas highways, and overlook it in the smart sounding logics of textbooks, policy statements, court rulings, science journals, and cutting-edge technologies (Benjamin 2016b). To close, if postracial innovators are busily refurbishing racism to make inequality irresistible and unrecognizable, then those who seek radical transformation in the other direction, towards freedom and justice, must continuously reexamine the default settings, rather than the routine breakdowns, of social life.¹⁰

Ultimately, we must also imagine and craft the worlds we cannot live *without*, just as we dismantle the ones we cannot live *within*.

10 As Harney and Moten urge, we "need to think more strategically about our own innovations" (2015).

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—Ruha Benjamin

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