

A GUIDE ON
HOW TO
UNLEASH
BLACK
IMAGINATION
TO SHAPE THE
FUTURE

(WITH AN ACCOMPANYING READING/
LISTENING/ WATCH LIST)

BY AISHA SHILLINGFORD

FOR



Bio:

Aisha Shillingford, (she/her), Artistic Director of Intelligent Mischief, is an artist, writer, and strategist originally from Trinidad & Tobago. She has been a spiritual and cultural organizer and network weaver for social movements. She is a collage and installation artist and sometime graphic designer. Aisha was previously the Deputy Director of Innovation Strategy at Movement Strategy Center. She is currently an inaugural Fellow at the Race Forward Butterfly Lab for Immigrant Narrative Strategy and an alumni of the Laundromat Project Creative Change Fellowship. Aisha loves plants, vintage clothing, & furniture. She is committed to cultivating connection to beautiful futures.



**BLACK. HISTORY.IS BEAUTIFUL.
BLACK. FUTURES.ARE BEAUTIFUL.
BLACK. HERITAGE.IS BEAUTIFUL.
BLACK, LOVE. IS BEAUTIFUL.
BLACK. MEMORY.IS BEAUTIFUL.
BLACK. JOY.IS BEAUTIFUL.
BLACK. VOICES.ARE BEAUTIFUL.
BLACK. POWER.IS BEAUTIFUL.
BLACK. VISIBILITY.IS BEAUTIFUL.
BLACK. LEISURE.IS BEAUTIFUL.
BLACK. REST.IS BEAUTIFUL.
BLACK. LIVES.ARE BEAUTIFUL.
BLACK. ECONOMICS.ARE BEAUTIFUL.
BLACK. ART.IS BEAUTIFUL.
BLACK. CULTURE.IS BEAUTIFUL.
BLACK. STORIES.ARE BEAUTIFUL.
BLACK. TECHNOLOGIES.ARE BEAUTIFUL.
BLACK. BODIES.ARE BEAUTIFUL.**

**DEAR BLACK PEOPLE!
UNLEASH YOUR IMAGINATIONS TO SHAPE
BEAUTIFUL FUTURES FOR ALL OF US!!**

What MONTH would this be if we all really loved Black people?

Would we get a free month of rent for being Black? A free month at the gym for being Black? A month of vacation for being Black? A month of free delivery on GrubHub? An all expense paid trip to a five star resort on a tropical island? What if Black History month was a month of reparatory actions? A month of returning capital no-strings attached to Black communities and organizations? What if it was a month when everyone apologized to Black people and any time you saw a Black person you gave them all the money in your bank account?! I would like to petition to change the meaning of Black History month please.

Well, anyway, here it is. We made it. The first Black history month since the beginning of an almost year-long global lock down due to the COVID-19 pandemic; the first Black history month since the massive uprisings of Freedom Summer of 2020.

And I'm tired. I think a lot of us are tired. I mean, we've been tired. And sick. And sick and tired. And sick and tired of being sick and tired, to coin the Queen Fannie Lou Hamer (May she rest in gardens of eternal peace and leisure. I hope she's sitting on some comfortable couches being pampered, her feet being rubbed. Being fed whatever she desires.). We've BEEN tired but this year, this unprecedented year, has been particularly exhausting. I am craving time and space to daydream, to imagine. I can totally picture it. There is a beautiful wooden house on a hill overlooking a gorgeous beach. The house has a generous verandah in the corner of which is strung a hammock that has my name all over it. I dream of lying there all day, drifting in and out of sleep. Dreaming, fantasizing, reading. Maybe delicious foods are appearing out of nowhere. I am interrupting this day of basking only to walk down to the beach and take a dip in the ocean. And once there, lie down some more on the sand. So my personal fantasy is the space to just dream. I crave copious amounts of free time to let my mind wander. To consider new ideas and possibilities. And this is exactly the kind of yearning that reflects the systemic disparity of imagination that we experience as Black folks. We are not any less capable of imagining. Far from it. Lord knows it took some deep and wild imagining to get us this far together. But that's just the thing. When our collective condition is focused on securing our survival, like any other situation of abuse and control, your imagination is limited by the imperative to just survive. When you are using everything in your power to survive it is hard to imagine the future. So I crave time and space for us to imagine beautiful futures for all of us.



Collage by Aisha Shillingford

During the last year or so I have been exploring what it looks like for Black folks to imagine beautiful futures. Looking across various Black speculative traditions, art, music, films, etc. Asking these texts and their authors, what does imagination mean to Black folks and how do we do it? How have we done it? Below, you'll find an incomplete list of practices that I've found to be core to the Black imagination as I have come to understand it. I know there must be so much more and I'm excited to continue to explore. And, I want to share what I've learned so far so we can get a head start on dreaming new worlds.

1. Rest.

Tricia Hersey of the Nap Ministry has been preaching the gospel of rest to us for years. Reminding us that hustle and grind are capitalist tentacles intended to prevent us from dreaming beyond the current systems. Rest is integral to dreaming and imagining and it is an act of refusal of the system that intends to work us to the bone, to use us up and then discard us. Deem yourselves worthy of rest, reclaim agency over your own time, honor the needs of your bodies. There is no dreaming without rest.

2. Make space. Declutter.

It's hard to imagine the future when we are overwhelmed with our present. To make space to imagine we can declutter our emotional and physical space by removing items in our closets and calendars that don't 'spark joy'. Create more space in your living situation, where possible. These clear spaces in our homes and on our calendars allow ideas and vision to flow freely.

3. Ritual & Ceremony. Make everything sacred.

Morning rituals. Bath rituals. Bedtime rituals. Love rituals. Rituals of remembrance. Rituals are mindful practices of gratitude and self-love that we can do on a regular basis and that bring a sense of sacredness and spirituality to our lives. They connect us to ourselves and to other beings.

4. Petit Marronage. Retreat. Harness Fugitivity.

Sometimes we just need to get away. Get a change of pace. See new sights that can inspire new vision. Petit Marronage is a practice of temporary retreat where we can breathe, immerse ourselves in a new reality, and experience a glimpse of liberation.

5. Look back to go forward.

Connect with ancestors. Read revolutionary history. Explore African cosmologies. Retrace our many journeys and migrations. Read the words of those who have come before. So many seeds of the future we imagine lies in the fertile soil of our past.

6. Find a small group of committed people.

Surround yourself with a community of care, belonging and becoming. Engage with friends in articulating together dreams of the future. Study together. Write manifestos. Declare a beautiful vision with other people and share your ideas and experiments. Learn together. Practice the society of the future in the way you treat each other.

7. Create a syllabus of reading, viewing and listening resources.

Make a list of things you are curious about. Research books, films and art related to those interests. Set aside time to read, view art, listen to podcasts etc. Take note of what resonates. Share with others.

8. Immersive, multi-sensory experiences.

Stimulate your senses by engaging in immersive experiences. Attend an immersive installation or create your own by running a warm bath with a scent (or no scent) of your choice. Put on some music and drink something delicious. The idea is to stimulate as many of your senses as possible at the same time.

9. Commune with your siblings in nature. Forest bathe. Submerge in water.

Connect with nature. Go hiking or swimming. Ease the borders between yourself and other beings.

10. Daydream.

Spend some time letting your mind wander. I like to do it after waking up in the morning. Just lie there for a few minutes and let my mind go down all the passages and alleyways of itinerant thoughts without needing to commit to any action.

11. Ask yourself “What if?”

If you have a writing practice, give yourself the prompt “What if?” and question the status quo. Question things as they are and imagine them as they could be? Try new things. Experiment. Be curious? Start small and see where it takes you.

12. Consume fiction, futurist, and fantasy stories.

Read. Read. Read. Read books of fantasy and futurism. Through books and films, travel the worlds built by brilliant afro-futurists and fantasy authors. Watch Black sci fi fantasy movies. Explore afro-futurist and surrealist art and music.

13. Take up a daily creative practice.

Write, make art, paint, collage, dance or play an instrument daily. Lose yourself in the creative practice. Create for the process, to learn and to be in flow. Let go of any outcome or expectation. Fall in love with creating.

14. Re-imagine the past.

There’s a lot of urgency around creating alternative futures than those we seem to be on the trajectory towards. But have you tried re-imagining the past? Choose a point in history that interests you and ask yourself, what if that had never happened? Where would we now be? What if we had done that differently? What might have changed?

15. Errant Wandering.

Take yourself for a walk to nowhere. Let your body wander (safely, please). Let your instincts guide you on which way to go, which corners to turn. Discover new things about your town. Look at your neighborhood with eyes of wonder. There are so many hidden treasures in the places we call home.

16. Embrace the longer now and the bigger we.

Imagine yourself in the middle of an arc that stretches backward and forward 100 years. Think about the people who lived in your city or region 100 years ago. Who were they? What were they doing? Think about the people who will live in your city 100 years in the future. Who are they? What will they be doing? Think of yourself in connection to an ever widening circle of connection. Imagine someone on the other side of the planet. Who might they be? What might they be doing?

17. Explore traditional African literary and aesthetic forms.

Read African authors. Explore African design and architecture. Learn about pre-colonial African societies.

AND HERE'S A BIT OF OUR READING LIST IF YOU WANT TO DO YOUR OWN EXPLORING:

BOOKS

- Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination by Robin D.G. Kelley
- Black Imagination by Natasha Marin
- The Black Imagination: Science Fiction, Futurism and The Speculative by Sandra Jackson
- Chimurenga Chronic - The African Imagination of a Borderless World
- Afrofuturism: The World Of Black Sci-Fi And Fantasy Culture*
- Obsidians Speculating Futures: Black Imagination and the Arts
- We travel the space ways: Black imagination, fragments and diffraction
- Black utopia, the history of an idea: from Black nationalism to Afrofuturism
- Queer times, Black futures
- Fictions of land and flesh
- Afrofuturism 2.0*
- Speculative Blackness
- Liberation, Imagination, and the Black Panther Party: A New Look at the Panthers and Their Legacy*
- Black Regions of the Imagination: African American Writers between the Nation and the World
- Posthuman Blackness and the Black Female Imagination
- Black Imagination and the Middle Passage (W.E.B. Du Bois Institute)
- AfroSurrealism: The African Diaspora's Surrealist Fiction (The Cultural Politics of Media and Popular Culture)
- When is Wakanda: Afrofuturism and Dark Speculative Futurity
- Philosophy, Mythology and an African Cosmological System
- Darkies Never Dream: Race, Racism, and the Black Imagination in Science Fiction
- Octavia Butler on Rules for Predicting the Future
- Dark Matter: A Century of Speculative Fiction from the African Diaspora
- Afro-Future Females: Black Writers Cart Science Fiction's Newest New Wave Trajectory
- Mojo by Nalo Hopkinson
- The Wave by Walter Mosley
- Black Atlantic Speculative Fictions
- Black to the Future by Mark Dery
- Black to the Future by Walter Mosley
- Astrofuturism: Science, Race, and Visions of Utopia in Space by DeWitt Douglas Kilgore
- NoN-Black Imagination (but still somehow useful)
- Clay's Ark by Octavia E. Butler
- Speech Sounds (short story) by Octavia E. Butler
- The Negro Trail Blazers of California by Delilah L Beasley
- The World Doesn't Require You by Rion Amilar Scott
- Genesis: An Anthology of Black Science Fiction
- Trans Futures
- Imagining Otherly: Performing Possible Black Trans Futures in Tangerine
- More Brilliant than the Sun by Kodwo Eshun
- Ten Droid Commandments by Janelle Monae
- The Comet by WEB DuBois
- Blake, The Huts of America by Martin Delany
- Imperium in Imperio by Sutton Griggs
- Ark of Bones and Other Stories, by Henry Dumas
- Black, Brown and Beige: Surrealist Writings from Africa and the Diaspora by Robin Kelley and Franklin Rosemont
- The Afrosurrealism Manifesto by D. Scot Miller
- Black From The Future
- Freedom Time, Negritude, Decolonization and The Future of the World
- In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition
- This planet is doomed: the science fiction of poetry - Sun Ra

MOVIES

- Fast Color Saaraba by Amadou Saalam Seck
- Space is the Place
- Parliament/Funkadelic Documentary
- The Upsetter
- Pumzi
- The Last Angel of History - John Akomfrah
- AfroDigital

MUSIC VIDEOS

- Daydreamin' - Lupe Fiasco
- Next Lifetime - Erykah Badu
- Jump Up in the Air - Erykah Badu
- Prototype- Andre 3000
- Many Moons - Janelle Monae
- Moonwalker - Michael Jackson

