ABS
ASSOCIATION OF BLACK SOCIOLOGISTS

The Griot

THE IMAGINE BLACKNESS PROJECT & EXHIBITION

The Imagine Blackness Project & Exhibition by Elizabeth Hordge-Freeman
Song: India.Arie – Brown Skin

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Elizabeth Hordge-Freeman and McArthur Freeman, II

Thrive by Imagine Blackness

Postcards from the Future by Imagine

In June 2022, my husband, McArthur Freeman, and I discovered the seemingly infinite possibilities of art and artificial intelligence through our use of Midjourney – a software program that uses text-based prompts to generate images. By entering various commands or textual prompts, the software can generate whatever has been described. In our first week of using Midjourney, we found ourselves hopelessly falling deeper and deeper into a melanin paradise. For hours on end, we stayed awake at night and often through the early morning, as we patiently watched hundreds and later thousands of our text prompts move from blurry figures to remastered versions of "beautiful dark-skinned African Americans." We were enthralled, perhaps even obsessed, by this new technology and we knew that we wanted to share our images and this experience with others. We posted our images on an Instagram page @imagine_blackness_ai and before long we had amassed over 10,000 followers. In one quintessential example of the power of AI to unite Black people across the world, one of our Brazilian followers felt so inspired by our image of a young Black boy astronaut that he tagged us on an image of the large mural of this very image that he painted on a side of a building in São Paolo, Brazil! Representation matters – *Representatividade importa!*

Our goal for the project has been to use artificial intelligence to reclaim and reimagine Black representation both as a revolutionary act of self-love and as an act of collective resistance. We felt this was necessary in the context of the suffocating images of anti-Black violence in the media… and from the weight of addressing anti-Blackness in our own work. For example, in March 2022, I published a new book, *Second-Class Daughters: Black Brazilian Women and Informal Adoption as Modern Slavery*, which chronicled ten years of my research

on the abusive, violent and exploitative relationships that Black women face in Brazil. The Imagine Blackness project represented a much-needed escape for us and a way for us to acknowledge, heal, and provide hope to Black people across our local and global communities. The emotional reactions to our Black Santa series and accompanying Instagram reels revealed just how starved Black people have been of images that represent us.

Interest in our Instagram page culminated into our AI art exhibition at the Creative Pinellas gallery, which was entitled, *Imagine Blackness: Alternate Realities And Collective Dreaming*. As a whole, images in the exhibition address persistent gaps of Black representation in society with an eye towards re-envisioning the past and imagining the future. In the first gallery space, we displayed captivating images of Black people in botanical paradises where their melanated skin, natural hair, and distinctly African features glow from the aluminum metal prints. In the second gallery space, a video screen circulated dozens of images that we generated covering various themes including Black fairytales, African royalty, Afro-futurism, and African mythologies. In the final gallery space, we included an installation entitled, "Postcards from the Future," where we displayed over 50 postcard-like prints showcasing a future where Black people live freely in technologically advanced and underworld societies. Apropos of the exhibition title, we asked our viewers to engage in "collective dreaming" by sharing their dreams about the future on a card. In the last week of the show, we generated postcards that reflected the dreams submitted by museum visitors.

Gallery Exhibition Photos by Sandrasonik Photography

With all that said, the sociologist and Black feminist killjoy in me must temper excitement about AI, due in no small part, to the glaring flaws and biases that we observed. We noted that white was the default norm so all of our images had to be painstakingly described so that Black people would be generated. But, most startingly, while Midjourney will produce whatever you tell it to create, there is one thing it seemed utterly incapable of generating. After requesting it to create a Black couple where the Black woman is dark-skinned and the Black man is light-skinned, it failed to generate it. Not only did it fail to generate this image, but it was also as though it was deliberately disobeying our very specific command. To be clear, the software produces whatever it is asked. It can produce a purple cow and blue chicken, but time and time again it failed to generate an image where a Black woman was darker than the Black man standing next to her.

So, where do we go from here? We'll continue to embrace art and artificial intelligence, but we'll do so while remaining vigilant about the algorithmic biases that shade this powerful technology.

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For more information about the exhibition and photos:

Tampa Bay Times

Bloom TV interview

The Association of Black Sociologists is committed to maintaining and cultivating a prophetic tradition of scholarship, mentoring, service, and social justice.