The New York Times
‘Black Futures,’ by Kimberly Drew and Jenna Wortham: An Excerpt
Wesley Morris
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Introduction
Letter from the Editors

Welcome to Black Futures, the first iteration of “The Black Futures Project” by co-editors Kimberly Drew and Jenna Wortham.

“The Black Futures Project” started a few years ago as a Direct Message exchange on Twitter and has evolved into a shared desire to archive a moment. In developing Black Futures, we sought to answer the question: What does it mean to be Black and alive right now?

We sought to make sense of our unique paradox: We have never been more empowered and yet, in many ways, are still so disenfranchised. Social media has granted Black folks a platform to tell our own stories, but it has also made us subject to a new brand of surveillance and unprecedented co-option. How can we find innovative ways to define ourselves, for ourselves, without fear of erasure or the deterioration of the Internet? We feel part of a long lineage of projects, artists, activists, thinkers, and creators centered on the Black experience. We consider Fire!! magazine, The Black Book, The Black Woman: An Anthology, Conditions: Five: The Black Women’s Issue, the work of Kathleen Collins, and 9 More Weeks by Sinazo Chiya as some of our most influential elders.

Black Futures is not designed to be a comprehensive document. Blackness is infinite— a single book cannot attempt to contain the multitudes and multiverse. This is just one manifestation of a project that spans millennia. We are in a continuum of those who came before and those who will come after and make a dent in the archival project that is required of us as humans on this planet. We strove to nod to those we admire who are making history, and those taking history and doing something anew with it. We aimed for a perspective that was global, atemporal, not dominated by America and the West, not constructed by binaries, and as dynamic as possible for a print book.

We invite you to read this book alongside a device so you can search out names and terms that intrigue you. See where they lead. Our intention is to encourage readers to follow their interests into a deep warren of rabbit holes and discoveries. This is not an art book. This is not a scholarly journal. This book is a series of guideposts for current and future generations who may be curious about what our generation has been creating during time defined by social, cultural, economic, and ecological revolution.

Like us, this book is not linear. Like us, this book lives and breathes beyond temporal Western frameworks. There is no past, present, or future, nor is there a beginning, middle, or end. Start where you please. This book was brilliantly designed by Jonathan Key and Wael Morcos to have its own geography, a map that can be navigated however you see fit. There are color schemes and indices throughout to serve as tools, but we did not want to subject the material to a major order, or any suggestion of a hierarchy. This is an invitation to create Black futures alongside us. For example, throughout the book, there are geometric symbols designed by Megan Tatum that resemble a fractal teacup. Those indicate recipes, or instructions, for you to consider implementing beyond our book.

Our process: We worked together and independently to collect these submissions. On these pages you’ll find screenshots, original essays, manifestos, memes, artworks, poems, song lyrics, recipes, and creations of all types. Themes in this book will provoke you, entice you, enrage you, spark joy, and call you to action. Some of the

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connections are obvious, but many are not. We think that that's okay. Wherever possible, everything in this book was made by Black hands.

These Walls Can Talk
Wesley Morris

The best way to experience Kehinde Wiley's portrait of Barack Obama—Kehinde Wiley's presidential portrait of Barack Obama—is to trek to it. It lives in Washington at the National Portrait Gallery, as do most official paintings of American presidents, and to find his, you have to make your way past everybody else's. And if you've gone to Washington (perhaps all that way to Washington) to see this portrait, your instinct (or sense of politics or American history [or limited time!]) might tell you to skip past everybody else (Andrew Johnson can kiss my Black ass). But suppress it. There's a case to be made for taking the long way. For one thing, the long way generates situational anticipation for your main attraction. Before you'd left the house, you'd have known what Wiley's Obama looks like—vivid and leafy and weird. So why not soak in the ordinary drabness and repetition of the 43 dudes before him? Why not let the Portrait Gallery tell you a story? Because that's the other thing: The story is pretty good.

The exhibit takes up about four large halls, and several of the pieces are large, too. And the Whiteness of the leadership becomes the story, but since you've come all this way, you can also probably savor the irony of where you'll wind up, that these memorials in oil and gouache pay tribute to 43 stewards of a country that legally spared itself the hassle of having to imagine the 44th, a country that stole two-fifths of Black humanity and did all the shitty things to Black people that you know it did. The closer you get to Wiley's portrait, knowing that you're getting closer, feeling the approach, the more intense your acrimony— or, perhaps, your acrimonious amusement. Then you get there, to the slab of a wall upon which it hangs, near Reagan and Clinton and the two Bushes, and you round the wall to face it, and 43 lemons make quite a cup of lemonade.

Wiley's portrait is so unlike what precedes it that it feels as much like a moral rebuke as an aesthetic antidote. No more autumnal solemnity, no more dead leaves but the living ones of spring, of salads, or salad days. Instead of brown backgrounds and brown furniture, just brown skin. There's no way to be prepared for this thing in person. You will behold it and want to cry. For the distance you might have traveled to see it. For the distance Black people have traveled. We came all this way. There's no preparation for its physical bigness or its science-fictional brightness. Bring shades. Bring a parasol.

Barack Obama is of a piece with Wiley's other gloriously Edenic aggrandizements of Blackness. This one, of course, is also of a piece with the space that contains it, positioned so as to be symbolically ambivalent about the long, grim national history that led up it. Obama faces us. But his back, for now, is to his ancestors.

Kehinde Wiley's portrait was announced as a twofer. Barack chose him. And Michelle Obama went with Amy Sherald. They were unveiled in a kind of media tandem, as well. And not everybody liked the trademark and imagination of Wiley's. But Sherald's vision of Michelle really seemed to bug people. It had no life, no fun, no Blackness. It's true that the skin of Sherald's Obama isn't brown. In a reproduction, her skin seemed gray. Also— and this really seemed to disturb people— it doesn't look like Michelle!

What there was to be mad at with respect to Sherald's painting is where the Portrait Gallery originally put it. If part of the thrill of the Barack Obama portrait experience is the story it tells, all of the exasperation with the Michelle Obama portrait experience is the story it tells. Her husband's in a great, vast room. She was in a hallway. Across from some elevators, near a pair of restrooms, just off the main entrance.

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When it’s five feet away, the painting turns out to be stunning. Its placement was not. You’re forced to think, once again, about what the country’s always thought of Black women. A Black woman’s picture of Michelle Obama was hanging in a hallway. But either because of the pandemonium to see the painting or the optics of having it be where it was, the Portrait Gallery moved it somewhere else, somewhere that didn’t clog the building’s rotunda and seemed more dignified.

Sherald’s painting felt more popular than Wiley’s. There were viral pictures of people—one little girl in particular, Parker Curry—simply beholding it. The portrait itself is a more daring statement of a different kind of power. With the back of one hand under her chin, Obama is seated against a sky-blue background. Well, we presume she’s seated. There’s no apparent chair to speak of, since whatever she’s sitting on is obscured by a white dress. And not any white dress. For one thing, in it there are these licks of color—big stripes of red, pink, and yellow. There are also blocks of geometry that maybe suggest the boogie-woogie phase of an artist like Piet Mondrian. The dress is a dress, but also a character, a quilt, a canvas upon which to splash your awe or befuddlement.

The reason to spend any time thinking about the dress is because the dress isn’t an accident or accent—nothing that takes up a third of a canvas is accidental. It’s a crown by another name. On anybody else, that dress is wearing them. But on Obama, it’s a complement. Its complexity, capaciousness, mystery, impossibility (how do you put it on, wear or walk in it; and since it’s too long for the canvas to contain it, where does it end?); its brightness, warmth, generosity all could be Obama’s. It seems to issue out from her.

Here’s a garment that lets her be. And what, in this portrait, is she being? Regal? Demure? Polite? Actually, Obama looks contemplative, captured in a moment of reflection. She would have sat for Sherald at the end of her White House tenure. There would have been time to think about all that she saw and that she came to mean, perhaps the lack of precedent for most of it. I can feel history in this portrait. I can also feel something glum. The blues happen to be part of the Amy Sherald project. That’s the actual color of the skin of the people she paints. A deep unsaturated blue. But also a whiff of melancholy. Kehinde Wiley’s portraits want to glorify the neglected and majestify the maligned. I think Sherald’s simply want to observe. Their ambition is to ask who else these people are besides the Black folks they would be tagged as. You look at Sherald peering into Michelle Obama and you’re rocked. She’s a figure of majesty, too. But she’s also another of Sherald’s everyday people. And for all the looking we’ve done at this woman, you really do wonder whether she’s ever truly felt seen.