



Homegoing

Integrated Project Thesis Work by
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I. Introduction

Isolation is interesting in the way that it shifts perspectives. For example, when you see the people you are surrounded by on a daily basis. Those people get taller, lose and gain weight, get wrinkles, age. The development is constant, so it is never noted. But there is also the inverse, when you see that long distance friend you haven't seen in two years, you can easily note how they have changed. Did something happen, in any rate you note that change. Similarly that is what happened to me in my past years at the University of Michigan, my surroundings were constantly changing to the point that they did not seem to change at all. In relation, my hometown was very different with every short visit home I took. Every visit began to seem like a trip to a distant land that was unbeknownst to me. Close friends had moved, the demographics had changed. I noted that a lot had and will be changing in terms of who Detroit is for. In a way, I had become an alien in a land I was a native to, thus removed enough to be able to critique its progress.

The city was no longer there to serve the residents that once resided there and built the city to what it is today. Rather, Detroit is becoming a form of escapism for consumers with new millennial money who are not open to understanding the environment prior to their habitation. Looking at how drastic the demographic shifts had become, I started to question 'why?'. Why is the shift being manufactured? For who and to whom does that profit or motivate? Upon asking these questions came research concerning how this has happened historically with consideration to the current political divide of the nation currently.

This project is important to show how history repeats itself often, specifically concerning the discreditation or invalidation of the experiences of marginalized identities. Current evidence of this cycle can be seen today as there is an influx of mudslinging towards immigrants by the Republican Party, who vouch to create physical barriers between the U.S. and Mexico without taking into account the individual

narratives of people who are migrating. Similarly, one would not have to look far back in history to find such a divide within Detroit, specifically in terms of housing discrimination and redlining.

Both ideas of physical barriers as a device to separate perceived identities and municipal powers working to create constructed divisions are exemplified within this project. However, instead of focusing how it is today, the project uses the past in order to re-contextualize how neocolonialist mindsets of changing an environment to suit people of more power could progress to something far more dangerous, the complete obliteration of what home means to us all. The film is far enough into the future that it makes the problem appear removed but close enough to use Afrofuturist tenets to cause reflection on the current state of Detroit. Further, a reflection on where Detroit is headed and how it could have traumatic effects on the generations after. This project showcases the faults of prioritizing capital over citizens in the long run, thus, providing a topic of dialogue. The time difference between 2165, the year the narrative takes place, and modern-day provides the audience alienation of the futurist context; removed enough to critique their own actions in the present as to how they contribute to such as future.

In modern-day Detroit, there has been an accelerated phenomenon of gentrification that have left many displaced. This project is a six-minute short film that is comprised of live-action interviews of current Detroit citizens that have been affected by the city's demographic shifts, which is framed by an animated storyline. The storyline follows a young girl that embarks to find a home for her family after a government officiated residential zoning based on societal status in 2100s Detroit. This projects seeks to promote conversation around who is affected by the future of gentrification in Detroit.

II. Contextual Discussion

Detroit Redlining

The context for this project revolves around the study of demographic shifts as they intersect with tenets of Afrofuturism. In discussion of gentrification, more specifically, it would be amiss to not acknowledge the factors that lead to its consequential social divisions and hierarchies. One instance that

this occurs is in the study of the restrictive Housing Covenants in Detroit prior to the 1960s¹. During this time, the federal housing offices thrived on creating and reinforcing housing restrictions that were strictly race-based, leading people of color, especially African Americans, unable to progress in social and residential mobility. Instead, this left many stagnated from an economic and educational stance, which led to rebellion, which that led to white flight. This phenomenon led to a less integrated government and city population as a reflection of the racial climate. This is evident in the housing discrimination practices within Detroit of the time, which is best exemplified by the first restrictive covenant appearance in the case *Parmalee v Morris*, where African American and Detroit natives, Anna morris and her husband, purchased a property in Pontiac, a Detroit suburb in 1910. During this time, they were sued by their neighbor residing near them for being non-white, against sanctions in the deed. Cases similar to this were implemented to reinforce hierarchies where most resources were allocated to White residential areas, thus leaving many others to become stagnated. Detroit is not alone in this manufacturing of identity-based immobility. Redlining and restrictive housing in Detroit and Chicago initiated housing reform based on race and socioeconomic status.² This manifested in various ways, such as the physical Detroit Wall built to separate Detroit and Grosse pointe that acted as a racial barrier³. This wall was named after the Berlin Wall in order to show that those same inequities that struck divide amongst people as hurdles between individual pursuits of happiness.

A 'Red Wall' is used within the film to not only beckon attention to this part of the past and its relevance to future generations inhabiting urban cities, but also the current walls that exist to prevent the mixing of classes. This is evident in observing the current presidential administration attempting to build a barrier between Mexico and the U.S., the Haitian-Dominican border, the Palestinian conflict. All are

¹ Dorceta Taylor, *Toxic Communities: Environmental Racism, Industrial Pollution, and Residential Mobility* (New York: NYU Press, 2014)

² Taylor, *Toxic Communities: Environmental Racism, Industrial Pollution, and Residential Mobility*

³ Matthew Schwartz, "In Detroit, A Colorful Mural Stands As A Reminder Of The City's 'Segregation Wall'," *NPR.org*, July 22, 2017, <https://www.npr.org/2017/07/22/538760677/in-detroit-a-colorful-mural-stands-as-a-reminder-of-the-citys-segregation-wall>.

modern-day situations that are not all on a comparable level; however, they all involve a physical barrier between people that is solely manufactured to uphold power structures that keep marginalized people disempowered and misplaced from where they have created their sense of identity.⁴

The Manufacturing Process of Gentrification in Urban Spaces

In the film, I recreated this equitable system of zoning and residential immobility. In order to fully grasp how to build that futurist and fictitious world, I needed to further analyze how that kind of demographic shift is manufactured. The conception of these restrictions and how they currently manifest in a modern-day context, one could observe the demographic shifts from suburbia to urban spaces began in the 1980s in California. More specifically, study the city of Santa Ana, in the book *Latino City* by Dr. Erualdo Gonzalez, which has revealed that gentrification is created by a progression towards New Urbanism, transit-oriented development, and creative-class development approaches to spatial alienation⁵. Modern city redevelopment plans are based on socially constructed problems of imagined communities. This leads to the erasure of existing and majority populations from redevelopment consideration and creates a set of practices prioritizing future communities⁶. By capital being allocated towards more elite products, areas of those products and accompanying activities, it raises the cost of living. This essentially acts as a weeding out process for deciding who is more worthy to occupy an area of new investments.

Ultimately, González argues that ‘planners’, described as city officials, developers, etc use gentrification provide resources for the white middle-and upper-middle-class population. This covert discrimination act is congruent with the effects of redlining and restrictive housing clauses as mentioned earlier. The analysis of Santa Ana exhibits that Latinx citizens and businesses were often labelled as places of hostility and violence in order to vilify the current residents, thus, giving a justification for the aforementioned racist and classist acts.

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⁵ Erualdo R. Gonzalez, *Latino City: Urban Planning, Politics, and the Grassroots* (London: Routledge, 2017).

⁶ Erualdo R. Gonzalez, *Latino City: Urban Planning, Politics, and the Grassroots*.

This analysis how a rebranding process of a people can make them appear to err the line of civil deviance, and therefore, deserve to be displaced, the result of most gentrification processes. This is the very same dog whistle language that I witnessed as someone isolated from Detroit for a time. The most notable aspect here is the realization that the stories told concerning people in urban spaces often occur to eventually garner profit and make the acquisition of resources a smoother process. A process that is inherently unjust and widely unrecognized.

Afrofuturism and the Armageddon Effect

In order to create this futurist context and allow it to be more digestible , more removed for the general audience to see themselves within the narrative I believed that reimagining the future through the lens of my identity would be most effective, hence the afrofuturist undertones. Taking this modern approach to a place of science fiction is in alignment with the tenets of afrofuturism, which Afrofuturism explores black identity, culture and struggles through the lens of science fiction. Heavy focus on works are more dystopian and utopian, using science fiction tropes to explore the difficulties facing minority groups in the present day. Through this lens, I have been able to explore the current problem of displacement of POC in a way that gives credibility to the fictional universe where people are separated in extremes. In the book, *Afrofuturism 2.0: The Rise of Astro-Blackness*, the author argues that the way the supposed fall of the United States ,and subsequently, the world has happen already. However, this from a subjective point of view.The armageddon seen in pop culture can be seen to be derived from the very real realities of people of color in America and other nations colonized by European countries.⁷ The primary argument in the chapter of the *Armageddon Effect: Afrofuturism and the Chronopolitics of Alien Nation* is that this armageddon has resulted in the post-apocalyptic future we currently look to in fiction is what we currently exist in a post apocalyptic world, a post colonization world. In part of this chapter he relates this

⁷ Reynaldo Anderson and Charles E. Jones, *Afrofuturism 2.0: The Rise of Astro-Blackness* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2015).

theory to that of the 1974 *Sun Ra film Space Is the Place* and the writing of Karl Marx⁸. In this comparison, he relates the ambiguous end of the earth in the film with that of the term “black skins” that describe the conquered POC in the context of colonization. Black skins are looked in an “alien” manner in which they are considered a living product to be commercially hunted⁹. Most of the sources are the examinations of pop culture by way of movies and music videos, while the author makes most evidence seem apparent when examined from a view that was deeper than a high level approach.

When originally looking at the problem of displacement and how to visually convey that and the scene one goes through in an urban environment, I automatically thought about the term of neo-colonisation. The developed my research question to question whether to focus on the more abstracted version of my project that would show the future of the displacement of mostly marginalized people to rather, show the apocalypse in the now. What does the new colonialism look like as it happens before our eyes? Contemplating this concept, I thought of how to be more immersive in this experience for the audience , who will have mixed experiences related to displacement due to class differences.

Creative Work

Dynamics of Worldbuilding

The aspect of this work that was the most rewarding and vital for the storyline has been the worldbuilding aspect, which is inherently more conceptual than the actual execution of the work. Within using the space, I was able to manipulate the context to follow suit. Important decisions to convey that sense of futurism to the point that the audience would know the overall context without being overly explicit. For inspiration, I studied the works of *Akira*, a 1989 animated film by director Katsuhiro Otomo. Within that work is a story using futurism in to convey the effects of the World War bombings,

⁸ Reynaldo Anderson and Charles E. Jones, *Afrofuturism 2.0: The Rise of Astro-Blackness*

⁹ Reynaldo Anderson and Charles E. Jones, *Afrofuturism 2.0: The Rise of Astro-Blackness*

government regimes and how that creates a division amongst a people.¹⁰ This work has a heavy emphasis on industrialism and nuclear warfare and how the citizens of Tokyo interact with those circumstances. Exploring this enabled me to think more conceptually about the world I was creating rather than the actual execution. Primary research in and visual cues concerning historical contexts acted as the backbone of the story. The audience could see this most within observing the spaces the characters of Home Going are interacting in, especially in the architecture as well as signage in the background.

Visualizing Social Divides

To emphasize the social divide present in the film, I chose to dig deeper into how this difference may manifest within a character/personal image (See Figure 1). In doing this, I've chosen to iterate with different materials that may in the future be used in mass production, but also reflects the lack and abundance of any person resources they have at hand. Focusing on organic cheap materials in building those who are on the opposite of the disadvantaged side of the wall. The end result has been using hemp like materials for those that have been displaced to not only the use of used materials, but also to how their space, much like them, have been disposed, displaced and consequently repurposed.

To further push this point, I have placed great emphasis on architecture in order to show a blatant contrast in resources used to build them in that world (See Figure 1&3). The use of neon as well as where to place metals, and how to distinguish the wear or condition of those metals in accordance to who they are built to serve. This is mostly seen on the landscape of the city.

As far as using the environment to appear more futuristic, I divided the world with the intention to make one half of Detroit appear industrial, with an emphasis on neon and metal. This idea was primarily conceived from my own experience after traveling abroad to Tokyo and witnessing the difference in use of space. I wanted the scenes for this half of Detroit to appear that one would not be able

¹⁰ *Akira*, directed by K Otomo. (1988; Pioneer, 1988), Film.

to breathe with such an influx of people atop one another. This is to exhibit that there was a fight for the residency of the city and proof of who belonged there. Looking at the movement of tiny houses in Tokyo and the use of lighting in order to advertise at a constant made me want to take those pre-existing notions of industrialism and technological advancement and put them in a place where the place looks like Detroit. From the Western mind, we typically associate Japan with technology, and for technology to be a symbol of forward movement, progression. As for the other half, the underprivileged side of Detroit in the film, there is a heavy emphasis on natural materials, the landscape the main character, Aganji, takes is earth-based looking. In this there was an intention of making it more dystopian, a sharp contrast between the other half of Detroit, therefore, a sharp contrast in perspectives and lived experiences between the divided classes represented in the film.

Further, historical references as well as cultural ones in the iteration process that leads to the story's themes of home and creation of culture. To tie modern-day issues with class separation, my work accomplishes this through the use of motifs of walls, political insignias, and the repurposing of materials. Motifs of the red wall throughout the storyline acts as a barrier between those that have abundant resources to stay and those that are being displaced by those with more access. The wall essentially stands as a signifier¹¹ of segregation of classes in history in terms of socioeconomic, citizenship status, race, gender, and creed that are relevant to today. This motif has been likened to that of the Berlin Wall juxtaposed against the "Detroit Berlin Wall", which brings the question as to "what are the repercussions of social divides?"¹². Representation in physical barriers that are the manifestation of social biases. The progression of this in itself a representation of the current US controversial wall ordained by Donald Trump. In witnessing the wall's backlash and those in agreement with the wall. In a future context, I

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¹² Matthew Schwartz, "In Detroit, A Colorful Mural Stands As A Reminder Of The City's 'Segregation Wall'," *NPR.org*, July 22, 2017, <https://www.npr.org/2017/07/22/538760677/in-detroit-a-colorful-mural-stands-as-a-reminder-of-the-citys-segregation-wall>.

decided that a wall is the best way to convey this type of divide. Further how to differentiate the inhabitants of those who benefit and are disadvantaged in that space.

Using Animation and Live-Action

In addition the look of the background, there are other elements that the film emphasizes in order to make it plain that the film is futurist. That is more so even more in the use of live-action in conjunction with the animated elements in documentary formatting. The purpose of combining these two forms of movie making was to not only show the possibility of this fictitious future, associated with animation, but also draw in the notion that we are not very far from the reality presented. Reality is stranger than fiction. That is to say that the audiences' reality and the realities of modern-day Detroiters play a part in creating equitable power structures that control the lives of others inadvertently. These stark contrasts of storytelling mimic the contrast of different realities of privilege and non-privileged. This aspect is even expressed in the fidelity of the animation. However, because these methods are very visually different. I sought to find the best way to integrate the assets. This was achieved by utilizing the film to look old and more glitchy, having interruptions in narrative (See Figure 5). This decision was influenced by the the film suggested by Cynthia Pachikara, *Hyper-Reality* by Keiichi Matsuda, a film that mixes animation and live action in order to comment on the disillusionment that internet-based spaces have in our everyday lives¹³. The film is exemplary in providing a built world on digital visual cues that create a dialogue concerning the audiences' perspective in relation to the animated services that fill their vision. Similarly, these two methods in my work create a dialogue on the subjective realities of the audience, the interviewees' experiences, and the overarching storyline of the main character. This occurs in order to question how such a domination over another's reality could be prevented and how each individual plays a role in creating a future that the film presents.

¹³ *Hyper-Reality*, directed by Keiichi Matsuda. (2016; Colombia, 2016), Film.

Methodology

Birth and Death of a Concept

The conceptualization and planning phase of *HomeGoing* was a cornucopia of pivots in terms of production and the overall storyline. Initially, I wanted to mimic the average animated series' format used by Nickelodeon Animation Studios and have four acts. This structure was set in order to have enough time to fully not only understand the perspective and development of the main character, but also become engulfed and have stakes in the film's storyline (See Figure 2). The first story was going to show the main character's journey of being within essentially an authoritarian government, finding the past tapes, looking for a home not under that regime, and finally finding that new home. However, I could not quite find a naturally flowing way to establish the setting. Initially, I attempted this by title cards alone in order to give the limited animation time more room to be digested by the audience. However, I did not want to compromise the use of environment and animated elements to create a visual language that explains the context.

Outside of building the concept, another pivotal aspect was the choice of character design. The decision for the characters' aesthetic had to mimic some sort of industrialism. However, in contrast to the earth-based hemp looking materials versus suits and uniforms, I began with the idea of everything evoking modernity (See Figure 6) such as this concept of the main character where they are primarily covered in metal, enforcing modernity. In contrast, by forcing this kind of future, I didn't believe I could adequately represent a dystopia, a genre in which most films have a heavy reliance of earth and recycled materials due to the lack of resources. At this point, I pivoted towards an aesthetic that would better

represent this sense of lack. This idea is even seen in the lighting use of color. Warm colors being used in emphasis of lack , and cool for that of abundance (See Figure 4).

Further, after resolving the storyline to the third act, in which the tapes are reviewed by the main character, I was at a loss. How do I end this? The concept behind the world presented in the film is so expansive that I did not want to force a happy ending. I tossed ideas concerning the tenet of Afrofuturist film, letting hope die down to then letting in room for magic to happen, something unforeseen. However, considering the subject, I did not want to undermine the experiences of current Detroiters being misplaced. Consequently, I left the ending with the main character not having closure by not finding a new place of residence. In turn, not giving the audience closure, being enigmatic enough for them to have the power to guess what could happen after and how their actions could determine of what the ending of this future context could be. With this worldbuilding I had to question if this fragmentation of accounts, of future and past would do the context justice, discussing racial, political, and geographical means that are viable to happen. This line of thought forced me to consider whether or not to make the narrative smaller, episodic, to use this project as an intro to a much larger breadth of work.

Conclusion

Overall, the conception behind the world that the film is set in is expansive in consideration of the possible political, racial, and architectural landscape that plays a role in what is . The film did accomplish the goal of bringing the modern effects of gentrification to audiences in a way that critiques the possible future they have the potential to cause. A future with more divisions of people and scramble for resources. Considering that there is a considerable amount of research, I believe there is great potential for further

exploration of the world visually as well as narrative wise. Consequently, I would like to make this project episodic in contrast to longer short film format it is currently in. In the beginning of this project, I wanted to focus on the world building rather than the actual narrative and execution, thus, I believe that is the next step before taking the work further.



(Figure 1. Scene showing Aganji trekking the environment outside of the city.)

Storyline

> Characters

▼ Scenes

Add ▼

Scene 1 ×

Scene 2 ×

Scene 3 ×

Scene 4 ×

> Notes

Redraw the Storyline

Redraw the Timeline

List all the Scenes

Edit all the Scenes

Scene 1

Type here to
Double-click

Stats

None selected ▼

Color

#6e8b92

Date

No Date

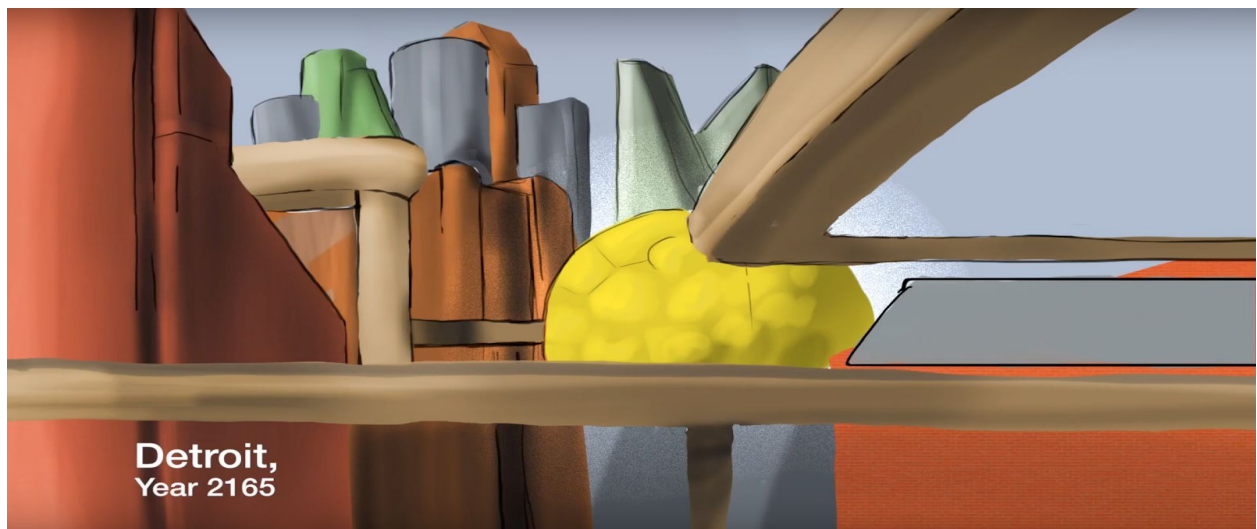
Synopsis

Year is 2165 Government has decided there is too many people and companies must rise
Come into agreement with a bill that passed leaves
leaves
Establishing shot

Research

- Propaganda scenes
- Opens with scenery from city and alleyway
- Flashback "it wasn't always like this"
- book
- Looks outside at window to see city
- tells story of family on a hill and the move
- shows paper of rent raise
- sees parents looking
- sits with what is to happen

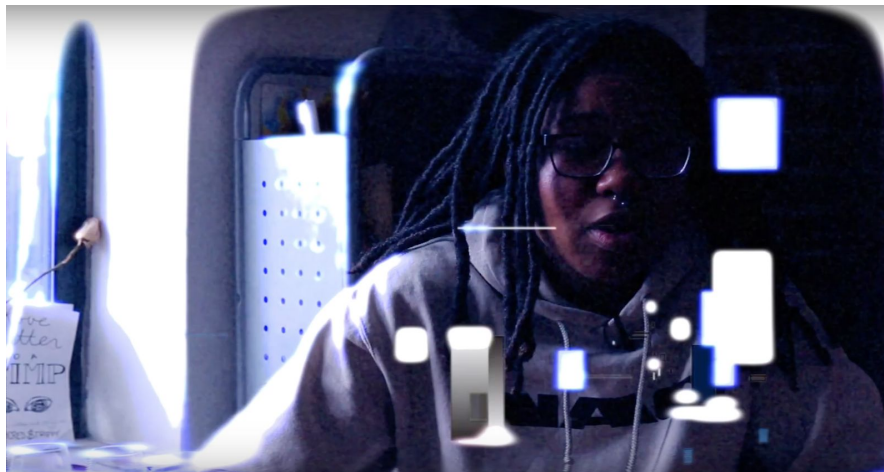
(Figure 2. Narrative Planning of *HomeGoing*.)



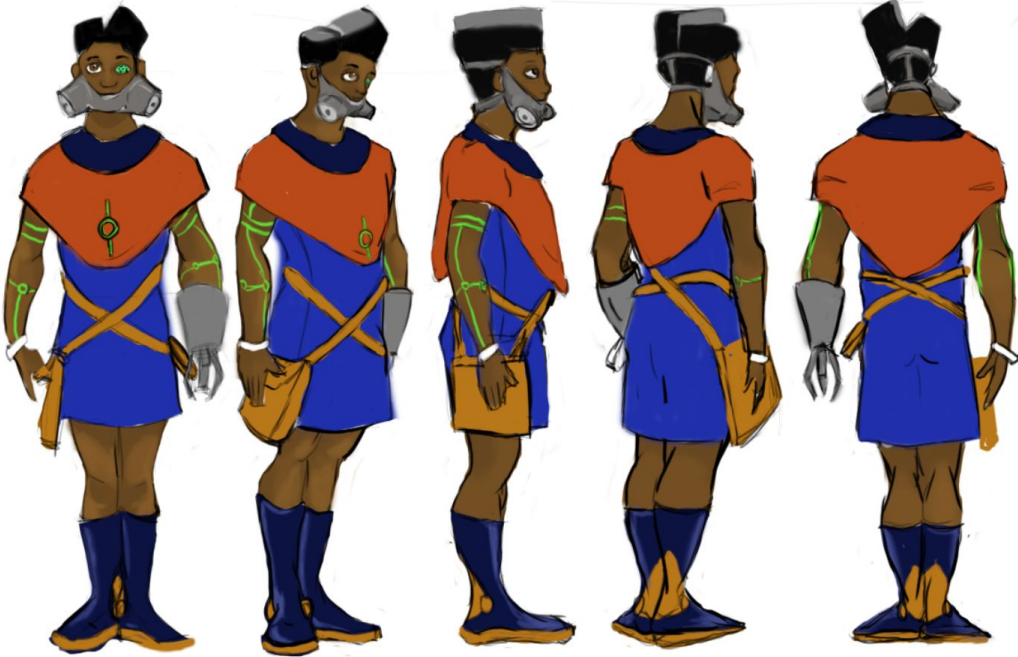
(Figure 3. Futurist landscape the higher class reside in *HomeGoing*)



(Figure 4. Progressives shown in the bipartisan system in *HomeGoing*)



(Figure 5. Interview with Adrienne Ayers that has added effects to blend with animated elements)



(Figure 6. Beginning iteration of *HomeGoing* characters)

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