

# (Sp/R)ace Woman:

## Dr. Mae Jemison, Afrofuturism, & the Utopian Program

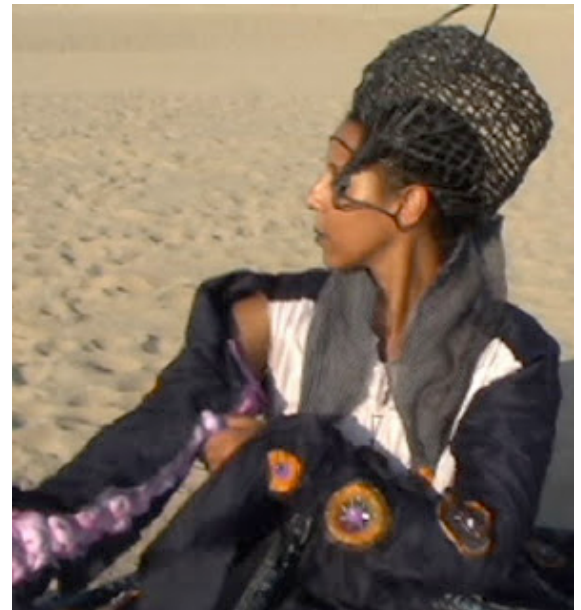
a presentation by celine nader

phd candidate | american studies | umass, amherst

course: blackness & utopia | 02.26.13

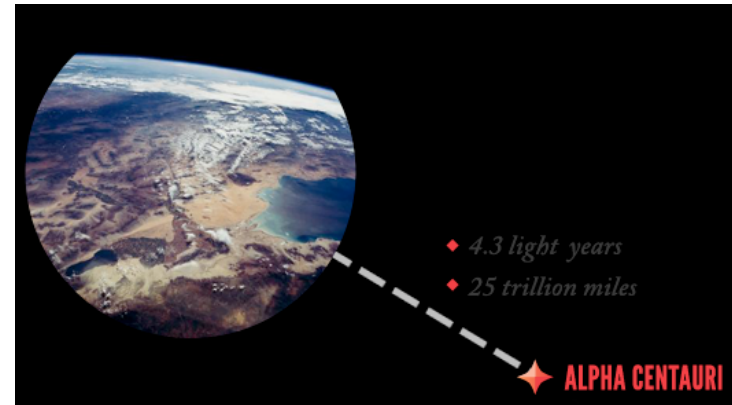
**"Super Space Riff: An  
Ode to Mae Jemison  
and Octavia Butler in  
VIII Stanzas"**

Still from performance /  
installation by D.  
Denenge Akpem



# Toward the Utopian Impulse & Claiming Blackness: Mae Jemison's Tweets *@maejemison:*

First woman of color in space, Physician,  
Scientist, Engineer, Explorer & Futurist.  
Leader 100 Year Starship.  
Someone who proves that daring makes a difference!



- [Dr. Mae Jemison @maejemison](#)

This anniversary of my spaceflight I commit to working to make [@100YSS](#) reality- human capability for interstellar travel w/in next century

- [Sep 12, 2011 Dr. Mae Jemison @maejemison](#)

**We need to commit to the next US human space vehicle** alongside great projects like GRAIL moon probes.

- [Sep 9, 2011 Dr. Mae Jemison @maejemison](#)

[@RealNichelle](#) who played Lt Uhura returned the favor 2 **spearhead recruitment of women & people of color** for [#NASA](#) shuttle program

- [Sep 9, 2011 Dr. Mae Jemison @maejemison](#)

**45 years ago, [#StarTrek](#) changed the face of space, science, adventure and exploration with its multi-hued co-ed crew.**

- [Aug 25, 2011 Dr. Mae Jemison @maejemison](#)

**Interstellar travel is one of the most meaningful & significant human challenges** [@100yss](#)

- [Aug 19, 2011 Dr. Mae Jemison @maejemison](#)

Spoke at opening of [#Smithsonian](#)'s **Black Wings on African-Americans in Aviation** at [#DuSableMuseum](#) in [#Chicago](#).

## Historicizing the links between NASA, space exploration, and the fight for desegregation & Civil Rights

### LISTEN:

***Race and the Space Race***  
on the radio series ***Out Of this World***

Link: <http://www.prx.org/pieces/41113-race-and-the-space-race#description>



**SUMMARY:** The Space Age began when America was going through a wrenching battle over Civil Rights. And because the heart of the old Confederacy was chosen as its base, NASA played an unintended role in Civil Rights history. In this program, we hear how this happened and we hear the stories of the people who broke the color line at NASA. Their stories of frustration and their stories of perseverance.

Produced by Richard Paul with Soundprint and **narrated by Mae Jemison, the first African-American woman in Space**, “Race and the Space Race” tells the unlikely story of Civil Rights and the Space Program.

Excerpted from: <http://www.prx.org/pieces/41113-race-and-the-space-race#description>

# Take a virtual tour of this history:



[www.capecosmos.org](http://www.capecosmos.org)

This link will bring you to a fictitious space facility set in the 1950s -1960s that allows visitors to explore both the challenging & triumphant experiences of the African Americans and women who were part of the early space programs.

*We travel the spaceways  
From planet to planet*

- group chant, Sun Ra' Arkestra

From a 1989 PRESS KIT BY A&M RECORDS

LINK: <http://www.elrarecords.com/sunra.html>



As Sun Ra once explained it, **"I never wanted to be a part of planet Earth, but I am compelled to be here, so anything I do for this planet is because the Master-Creator of the Universe is making me do it. I am of another dimension. I am on this planet because people need me"**.

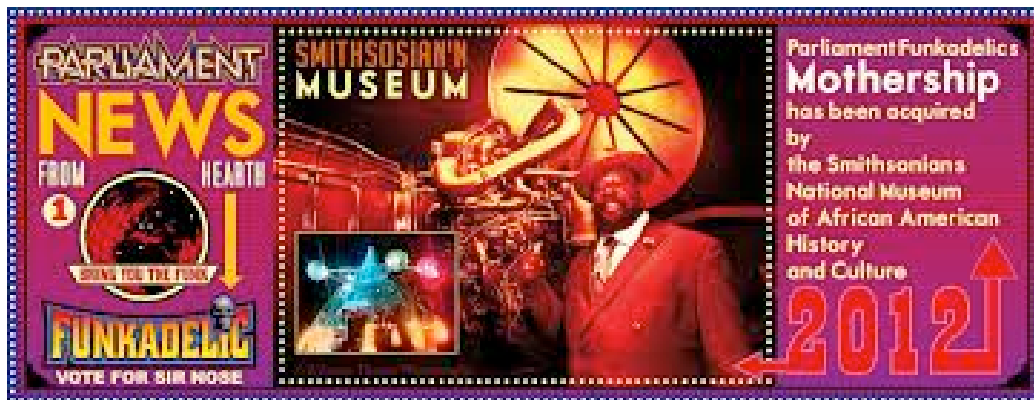
In an interview with Jazziz magazine, Sun Ra recalled, **"They really thought I was some kind of kook with all my talk about outer space and the planets. I'm still talking about it, but governments are spending billions of dollars to go to Venus, Mars, and other planets, so it's no longer kooky to talk about space"**. For Sun Ra, though, it has never been a matter of mere oddness. **When he talks of his Saturnian origins, of observing the planets and travelling the spaceways, and of "going into space",** it is really a lavishly elaborated metaphor, or so it seems to those who are not aware of the spiritual side of things. **Sun Ra's music transcends earthbound limitations** by riding the flights of imagination, and his message is that all of us are free to ride those flights with him if we have the precision and discipline to do so.



## Lyrical Excerpts from P-Funk's "Mothership Connection"

Well, all right!  
Starchild, Citizens of the Universe,  
Recording Angels.  
We have returned to claim the Pyramids.  
Partying on the Mothership.  
I am the Mothership Connection.

Starchild here, citizens of the universe  
Gettin' it on, partying on the Mothership.  
When Gabriel's horn blows,  
you'd better be ready to go.



Swing low  
Time to move on  
Light years in time  
Ahead of our time  
Free your mind, and come fly  
With me  
It's hip  
On the Mothership  
Groovin'

Swing down, sweet chariot  
Stop, and let me ride

black music & the space-travel trope  
black music & the space-travel trope



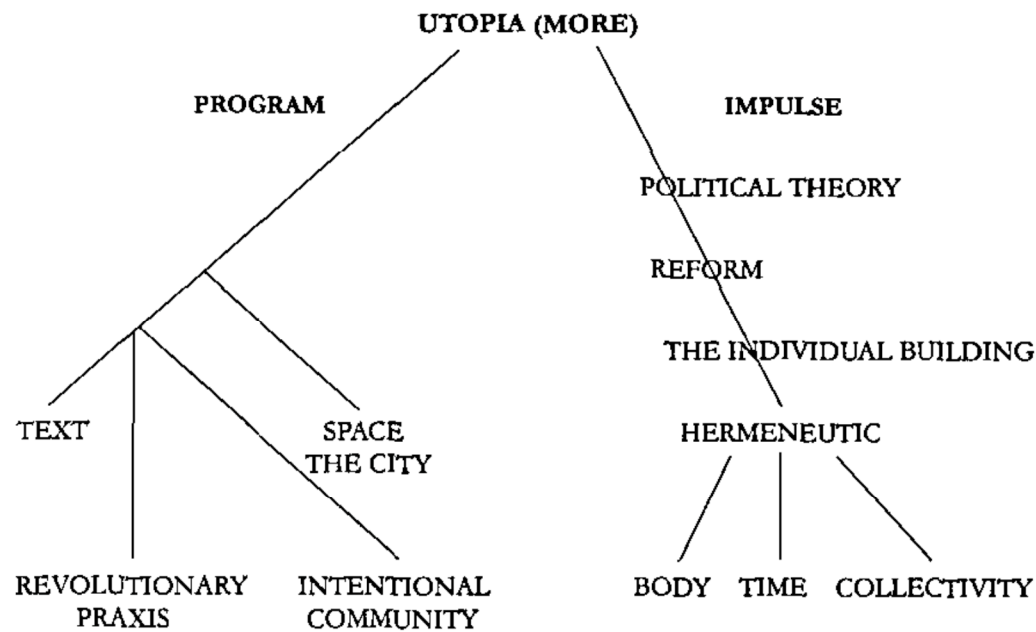
black music & the space-travel trope

## Episode 12: The Mothership Connection

### [LINK TO LISTEN!](#)

This episode is the final installment in a mini-series devoted to tropes in black music, with particular emphasis on the mothership and other extensions on tropes of transit such as the automobile and the river. The episode highlights songs by George Clinton, Erykah Badu, Sam Cooke, and others

From the Podcast Series, *Exploring Black Music* produced by the Columbia College Center for Black Music Research. It is a series of podcasts exploring concert, sacred, and all forms of popular musics in black music history from the sixteenth century to the present day.



## Theoretical model distinguishing the Utopian Impulse from the Utopian Program

From Jameson,  
*Archaeologies of the  
Future: The Desire  
Called Utopia and  
Other Science  
Fictions* (4)

## ON THE UTOPIAN PROGRAM:

**JEMISON:** Very seriously. One Hundred Year Starship really is about the idea that is we pursue an extraordinary tomorrow; we'll build a better world today.





# The 100 Year Starship Project:

an independent, non-governmental, long-term initiative for human interstellar flight.

[www.100yss.org](http://www.100yss.org)



- **Space.com** “Star Trek’s bold vision of the starship Enterprise manned by a diverse crew may no longer just be science fiction — especially with the first woman astronaut of color heading the real-life project. The U.S. military has chosen Mae Jemison’s nonprofit foundation to receive half a million dollars in seed funding to help turn the 100-Year Starship into reality.”
- **BBC** “Today, **Mae Jemison** may be best known as the first black female astronaut to travel to space, but someday she could be known for something much more monumental. That’s because she is now at the helm of what could well be the most audacious project ever imagined: a Pentagon-funded effort meant to lead within 100 years to a spaceship that will take humans to the stars.”
- In her own words: NPR’s radio program **On Point: 100 Year Star Ship**  
<http://onpoint.wbur.org/2012/05/25/the-100-year-starship>



**From Robin  
Kelley's  
*Freedom  
Dreams* (16)**

After all, the history of black people has been a history of movement—real and imagined. Repatriation to Liberia and Sierra Leone. Flight to Canada. Escape to Haiti. The great Kansas Exodus. The back-to-Africa movements of Bishop Henry McNeil Turner and Marcus Garvey. The 49th State movement. The Republic of New Africa. The Rastafarian settlement of Shashamane, Ethiopia. I'm goin' to Chicago, baby, I can't take you along. Space is the Place. The Mothership Connection. All these travel/escape narratives point to the biblical story of Exodus, of the Israelites' flight out of Egypt. It isn't a coincidence that the

The desire to pack up and leave persisted well into the late twentieth century, although it seems as though the story of Noah's ark from Genesis might have overtook the Book of Exodus as the more common analogy of flight. Increasingly, the ark has taken the form of the modern space ship, and the search for the New Land has become intergalactic. Predictions of the destruction of Earth abound. Genesis, indeed.

For at least a century, a long line of black intellectuals and religious leaders have contemplated space travel, including the Honorable Elijah Muhammad of the Nation of Islam. One of the

***Freedom  
Dreams*  
(30)**

Never be limited by other people's limited imaginations  
– Dr. Mae Jemison.

From  
Bloch,  
*The  
Principle  
of Hope*  
(10)

to act... There is nothing about such dreams which impairs or cripples creativity. In fact, quite the contrary. If a person were completely devoid of all capability of dreaming in this way, if he were not able to hasten ahead now and again to view in his imagination as a unified and completed picture the work which is only now beginning to take shape in his hands, then I find it absolutely impossible to imagine what would motivate the person to tackle and to complete extensive and strenuous pieces of work in the fields of art, science, and practical life... The gulf between dream and reality is not harmful if only the dreamer seriously believes in his dream, if he observes life attentively, compares his observations with his castles in the air and generally works towards the realization of his dream-construct conscientiously. There only has to be some point of contact between dream and life for everything to be in the best order."

From **Bloch, *The Principle of Hope* (10)**

It is a question of learning hope. Its work does not renounce, it is in love with success rather than failure. Hope, superior to fear, is neither passive like the latter, nor locked into nothingness. The emotion of hope goes out of itself, makes people broad instead of confining them, cannot know nearly enough of what it is that makes them inwardly aimed, of what may be allied to them outwardly. The work of this emotion requires

From **Astronaut Mae Jemison Plays *Not My Job***

on NPR's program *Wait Wait Don't Tell Me* – February 2, 2013

LINK: <http://www.wbur.org/npr/170879582/astronaut-mae-jemison-plays-not-my-job>



Taking up the task [of interstellar travel] ignites not only our imagination, but the undeniable human need to push ourselves to accomplishments greater than any single individual.

When we explore space, we garner the greatest benefits here at home. The challenge of traveling to another star system has incredible potential to generate transformative knowledge and technologies that will dramatically benefit each nation and the earth in the near term and the years to come.

hope & imagination

# Afrofuturism's Claims on Mae Jemison as (Sp/R)ace Woman: A Cyberspace Tour



---

However, as Dery argues in the second half of his definition, Afrofuturism is not only a subgenre of science fiction. Instead, it is a larger aesthetic mode that encompasses a diverse range of artists working in different genres and media who are united by their shared interest in projecting black futures derived from Afrodiasporic experiences.

From Yaszek,  
*Afrofuturism,  
Science Fiction,  
and the History  
of the Future*

(42)



## ***FROM: Constructing Future Forms: Afro-Futurism and Fashion in Chicago, Part I***

By D. Denenge Akpem - Chicago Art Magazine on Feb 01, 2012

LINK: <http://chicagoartmagazine.com/2012/02/constructing-future-forms-afro-futurism-and-fashion-in-chicago-part-i/>

**“We’re living in the space age... No matter where you are...”** Longtime **Arkestra** member June Tyson sings in a haunting chant, clad in the silver-ringed cap seen also on Sun Ra’s drummers.

As Chicagoan, NASA astronaut and the **first black woman in space** [Mae Jemison] challenged the audience in her keynote at DuSable Museum last summer, **“The future didn’t just happen; it was created.”**



**SunRa**



**Mae Jemison**



**IMAGE: "Super Space Riff: An Ode to Mae Jemison and Octavia Butler in VIII Stanzas"** Still from performance/installation by D. Denenge Akpem

D. Denenge Akpem is a performance artist, designer and educator. In addition to "Black Arts Movement," she is teaching a new course entitled "Afro-Futurism: Pathways to Black Liberation" at Columbia College Chicago.



Here are some preliminary comments that she has on Afro-Futurism from a recent interview:

# EXCERPTS FROM: What is Afro-Futurism?: An Interview with artist/educator D. Denenge Akpem

LINK: <http://postblackthebook.blogspot.com/2010/03/afro-futurism-interview-with.html>



**YLW:** *I think it's really interesting that you're teaching Afro-Futurism. [...]*

**What is Afro-Futurism?**

**DA:** There are many different definitions out there, and we consider as many definitions as possible in this class. The full title of the course is "Afro-Futurism: Pathways to Black Liberation." Afro-Futurism as a topic has to do primarily with blacks in the Diaspora but also the whole of African consciousness. Afro-Futurism considers what "Blackness" and "liberation" could look like in the future, real or imagined. It is rooted in history and African cosmologies, using pieces of the past, both technological and analog, to build the future. The basic premise of this course is that the creative ability to manifest action and transformation has been essential to the survival of Blacks in the Diaspora. There are many different ways people approach the topic.

**YLW:** *Like what?*

**DA:** Some are very technological about the approach. Others are a lot more holistic. Mark Rockey Moore, for example, talks about the afro itself as a metaphor for Afro-Futurism, as if its very form is futuristic, reaching for new dimensions and uncontained. Alondra Nelson is one of the key theorists on the subject, and we've been looking at DJ Spooky and his Rebirth of a Nation remix, Sun Ra's music and philosophy, Octavia Butler's science fiction. We've been focused on the last century and beyond.

The approach I take is to ask: how is the envisioning of the future an act of artistic revolutionary action? We're looking at artists who consider blackness as it might exist in the future, but also looking at artists themselves--beyond the art works--and how the actual creation of the work, the methodology is an act of or path to liberation for the artist, by the artist on behalf of the artist, communities, black people, the universe.



## AN EXCERPT: “Are you ready to alter your destiny?”: *Chicago and Afro-Futurism, Part 1 of 2*

By D. Denenge Akpem in Chicago Art Magazine, Jul 02, 2011

LINK: <http://chicagoartmagazine.com/2011/07/are-you-ready-to-alter-your-destiny-chicago-and-afro-futurism-part-1-of-2/>

**This Independence Day, let us consider a different kind of liberation: Afro-Futurism.**

From El Saturn Records to free-flowing jazz conversations with poet Henry Dumas to endless name variations of his Solar Arkestra—a play on orchestra and Noah’s ark—to true accounts of space abduction and exploration: **Sonny Blountt aka Sun Ra was the real deal: prolific jazz genius, human-alien hybrid, intergalactic space traveler, reluctant prophet.** [...] In *Traveling the Spaceways: Sun Ra, the Astro Black and Other Solar Myths*,<sup>[i]</sup> Kerry James Marshall writes **“Sun Ra is part of a long tradition of radical, Black Liberation ideologues...a combination of real-politic and myth-o-poetics.”**

**Afro-Futurism is an exploration and methodology of liberation, simultaneously both a location and a journey.** The creative ability to manifest action and transformation has been essential to the survival of Blacks in the Diaspora. “Black Secret Technology (The Whitey on the Moon Dub)” Julian Jonker writes, “Black Americans have literally lived in an alien(-n)ation for hundreds of years. The viscosity of their abduction is equaled only by the ephemerality of the bonds which the disciplinary state has since imposed on them.” Similarly, Boykin notes that in this context, “freedom is futurist.”

**Chicago’s history is rooted in liberation struggles;** the concrete jungle gives rise to a fiesty, rag-tag, Mad-Maxian, blue-collar style that respects hard work and survival of the fittest. We are alchemists in this city of steel, akin to the Yoruba god Ogun, fusing metal to metal. **We claim a real space traveler astronaut Dr. Mae Jemison, the first Black woman in space** and graduate of Chicago’s Morgan Park High School. In the tradition of **grand-forefather Sun Ra who graced our lake shores with his mystical genius, Chicago “shows out”** with the sanctification of conduit every young’s sweet nectar sweat as he navigates between states of being in his signature Sunday Mornin’ Juke Joint performance style.

## EXCERPT FROM: *Starship trooper: Female astronaut chosen to lead 100-year project to go beyond the solar system*



The full article was re-posted on Jan. 11, 2012 by blogger *1ruleofthirds* on *The Afrofuturist Affair*, a community formed to celebrate, strengthen, and promote Afrofuturistic and Black Scifi culture through creative events and creative writing.

**LINK:** <http://afrofuturistaffair.tumblr.com/post/15697195990/starship-trooper-female-astronaut-chosen-to-lead>

*The astronaut who became the first black woman in space in 1992 has been chosen to skipper the '100 Year Starship' project. [...] Mae Jemison will lead the project to explore what it would take for a multigenerational mission beyond the solar system.*

### Online Comments:

- *This is the result of that convo between Dr. King and Nichelle Nichols and his pleading with her to stay on Star Trek.*
- *takin melanin to new heights*
- *This is awesome because: a) Kick ass black woman being awesome sauce b) It's like a sci fi film in real life. Seriously,...*
- *Is this real?! OMGGG!!! I find it increasingly interesting how we all knew this was coming and yet its not plastered all...*

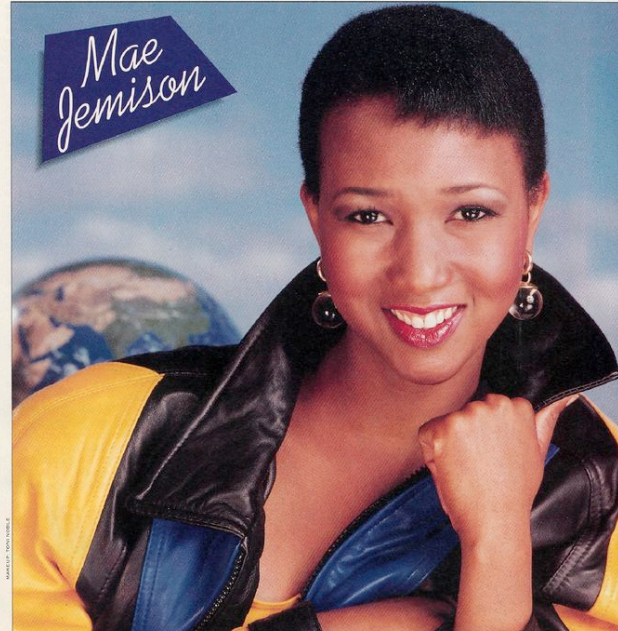


*Other links, articles, and sources  
mentioned in the cyberspace tour of Mae Jemison &  
her claiming by Afrofuturists:*

- ⊕ <http://www.drmae.com/>
- ⊕ [http://www.amazon.com/Astrofuturism-Science-Visions-Utopia-Space/dp/0812218477#reader\\_0812218477](http://www.amazon.com/Astrofuturism-Science-Visions-Utopia-Space/dp/0812218477#reader_0812218477)
- ⊕ <http://afrofuturistaffair.tumblr.com/post/15697133537/dr-mae-jemison>
- ⊕ <http://afrofuturistaffair.tumblr.com/post/15697133537/dr-mae-jemison>
- ⊕ <http://postblackthebook.blogspot.com/2010/03/afro-futurism-interview-with.html>
- ⊕ <http://sbattle2.blogspot.com/search?updated-min=2012-01-01T00:00:00-08:00&updated-max=2013-01-01T00:00:00-08:00&max-results=12>
- ⊕ <http://jovianphoenix.com/2010/02/19/everything-good-is-simple-by-nikki-giovanni/>
- ⊕ <http://aconerlycoleman.wordpress.com/2010/05/20/on-afro-futurism-or-im-a-black-woman-from-the-future/>
- ⊕ <http://futuristicallyancient.com/tag/mae-jemison/>
- <http://afrofuturism2012.blogspot.com/p/afrolink.html>
- ⊕ [http://www.colum.edu/CBMR/Resources/Exploring\\_Black\\_Music.php](http://www.colum.edu/CBMR/Resources/Exploring_Black_Music.php)

Are those stars twinkling in Mae Jemison's brown eyes? Could be. She did, after all, come within kissing distance of the celestial spheres as one of seven astronauts on last year's shuttle *Endeavor* and the first black woman in space. "The earth was gorgeous," she recalls. "There was a blue iridescent glow about the planet that was tremendous." Though unimpressed by earthly beauty ("I don't put a lot of stock in how people look"), her longtime friend Nichelle Nichols, who, as Lieutenant Uhura on the original *Star Trek* series, inspired young Jemison's extraterrestrial longings, finds her asteroidally arresting. "She's startling, absolutely dynamic," says Nichols. "Her eyes bore straight through you to the truth."

Jemison, 36, has long strived to go where few have gone before. Reared in Chicago, the youngest of three children of a teacher and a maintenance supervisor, she earned her chemical engineering degree at Stanford and her M.D. at Cornell. After 2½ years as a Peace Corps doctor in Africa and two years in private practice in L.A., she was accepted in NASA's training program in 1987, one of 15 chosen from nearly 2,000 applicants. Her mission now accomplished, Jemison quit NASA last March and plans to launch a company that will help bring advanced technology to underdeveloped countries. But even the full-blast, unmarried Houstonite needs to fire her retro-rockets occasionally. In late May she'll make a cameo appearance on *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, which is right in character. "Life is what your creator gave you for free," Jemison has said. "Style is what you do with it."



## PEOPLE MAGAZINE

May 03, 1993 Vol. 39 No. 17

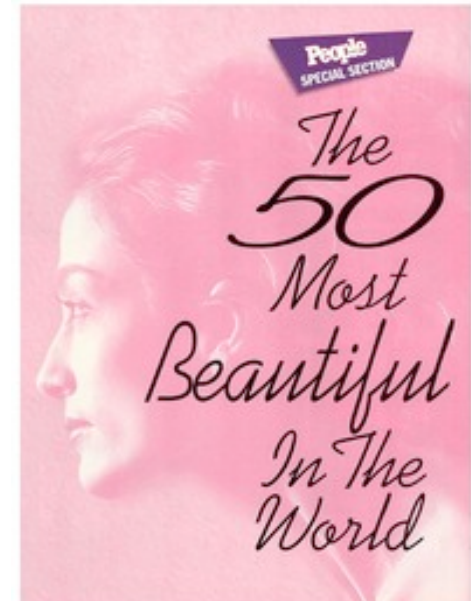
Are those stars twinkling in Mae Jemison's brown eyes?

Could be. She did, after all, come within kissing distance of the celestial spheres as one of seven astronauts on last year's shuttle *Endeavor* and the first black woman in space. "The earth was gorgeous," she recalls. "There was a blue iridescent glow about the planet that was tremendous." Though unimpressed by earthly beauty ("I don't put a lot of stock in how people look"), her longtime friend Nichelle Nichols, who, as Lieutenant Uhura on the original *Star Trek* series, inspired young Jemison's extraterrestrial longings, finds her asteroidally arresting. "She's startling, absolutely dynamic," says Nichols. "Her eyes bore straight through you to the truth."

But even the full-blast, unmarried Houstonite needs to fire her retro-rockets occasionally. In late May she'll make a cameo appearance on *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, which is right in character. "Life is what your creator gave you for free," Jemison has said. "Style is what you do with it."



## BLACK IS BEAUTIFUL







[celine.nader@gmail.com](mailto:celine.nader@gmail.com)

Utopia:

a castle,  
a planet  
a plan in  
the sky.

“Space

is the  
place.”