

Other Planes of There:
the MythSciences, chronopolitics and concepttechnics of Afrofuturism

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Other Planes of There.

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Abstract

“Other Planes of There: the Mythsciences, chronopolitics and concepttechnics of Afrofuturism” explores the becomings, temporalities, and epistemic systems of Afrofuturism. Afrofuturism — a term more complex than it first appears — delineates a counter-tradition of Afrodiasporic media production, thought, and performance that transforms science fictional practices and themes to envision alternate identities, timelines, and counter-realities. Such envisioning operations create startling, creative, and uncanny effects — often, by imaginatively challenging whitewashed futures and colonialist histories with Africentric and futurist revisionings, so as to alter the discriminatory coordinates of the present — while crucially offering ways to subversively transform Afrodiasporic subjectivities denied privileged access to the “human race”. Afrofuturism, I contend, postulates the conceptual thoughtware of its own production: its *MythScience*, *chronopolitics*, and *concepttechnics*. By explicating Afrofuturism through its network of concepts, I outline its production of counter-realities and explore its performative unEarthings of the grounds of human being. By tracing the Afrofuturist exodus from the category of the human, I detail how its practices adopt and disseminate alien, android, machinic, and otherworldly becomings.

Abstrait

« D'autres pensées venant de là-bas : les sciences mythiques, les chronopolitiques et les conceptuelles de l'afrofuturisme » explorent les devenirs, les temporalités et les systèmes épistémiques de l'Afrofuturisme. Afrofuturisme - un terme plus complexe qu'il n'y paraît - délimite une contre-tradition de production de médias afrodiasporiques, de pensée et de performance qui transforme les pratiques et les thèmes scientifiques fictifs afin de visualiser des identités, des échéances et des contre-réalités alternatives. Ces opérations de visualisation permettent de créer des effets étranges, créatifs et surprenants - souvent, en remettant en cause, à l'aide d'imagination, des avenir étouffés et des histoires colonialistes avec des reconsidérations futuristes et afrocentriques, de façon à modifier les coordonnées discriminatoires du présent - tout en proposant de manière déterminante des moyens de transformer subversivement les subjectivités afrodiasporiques qui se voient refuser l'accès privilégié à la « race humaine ». Je soutiens que l'Afrofuturisme se donne les moyens de produire sa propre pensée conceptuelle : ses Sciences mythiques, sa chronopolitique et ses conceptuelles. J'explique l'Afrofuturisme à travers son réseau de concepts, soulignant sa production de contre-réalités tout en explorant sa capacité à révéler son humanité. Je trace l'exode afrofuturiste à partir de la catégorie des humains, en détaillant la manière dont elle adopte et diffuse les devenirs étrangers, androïdes, machiniques et autres devenirs fantastiques.

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Preface

Original contributions in this doctoral thesis include the cultural and philosophical study of Afrofuturism and the exposition of a philosophy of becoming and exodus in Afrofuturism drawn from Afrofuturist concepts: concepttechnics, chronopolitics, MythScience, Armageddon been-in-effect, and Alien Nation. The concepts of “offworlding” and “unEarthing” constitute original conceptual interventions within philosophical discourses of (human) becoming and studies of post-humanism.

Chapter 00

I Am Not A Human Being...

By 2010, Afrofuturism had returned to the heights of pop culture, its alien, outer space, and time travel motifs appearing in the most unlikely of places: hip-hop superstar Lil' Wayne, the self-declared "Greatest Rapper Alive" from New Orleans, had titled his latest album *I Am Not A Human Being* (2010).¹ The title suggested not only Lil' Wayne's bizarre displays of rhyme and public strangeness — perhaps due to *leanin'*;² perhaps due to subsequent reports of several seizures requiring medical treatment;³ perhaps due to a string of arrests for weapons and drug possession leading to incarceration;⁴ perhaps due to invasive and significant dental surgery⁵ — but a trope of Afrofuturism that plays on the historical fact of slavery: that blackness, despite its supposedly pop culture status, remains unhuman. Or

1. It appears Afrofuturism has become bankable. In the 21st century, both science fiction and black culture alike have emerged from marginality to occupy aspects of the commodified centre. It is worth pointing out the economics of this transition. Taken as pop culture phenomena, both science fiction and black culture have become multibillion dollar franchises. Disney purchased Lucasfilm's *Star Wars* empire for 4.05 billion US dollars (Quinn 2012). Rapper Jay-Z is worth an estimated \$450 million (Jurgensen). Science fiction, like blackness, has merged with the technological pallor of everyday life and its cycles of cultural profiteering. The grandiose visions of the future that permeated the "Golden Era" of early to mid-20th century science fiction — jetpacks, robots, space travel, flying cars, talking computers — have, in some ways, already passed into quaint oblivion at the same time that its more mundane but far more powerful telecommunications technologies have revolutionised labour and production. I say that Afrofuturism has "returned" because of its prior pop culture resonance in the 1970s and '80s — just as blackness is bought and sold, once again, in a repeat of its originary commodification under slavery.

2. A mix of prescription-strength cough syrup (featuring codeine and promethazine) with Sprite, sometimes with Jolly Rancher candy for flavour, and popular in the Southern hip-hop scenes. Leanin' apparently originates from Houston, Texas. The effect is usually described as "dissociative", including from one's own body parts. Feeling *unhuman* after a quantity of lean would probably be an apt descriptor.

3. The popular press details a string of sudden and unexplained hospitalisations throughout 2012 and into 2013. On March 18th, 2013, Wayne admitted he had epilepsy: "This isn't my first, second, third, fourth, fifth, sixth or seventh seizure. I've had a bunch of seizures. Y'all just never hear about them. But this time, it got real bad because I had three of them in a row" (2013, "Lil Wayne Says That He Suffers From Epilepsy", *ComplexMag.ca*, 28 March, accessed 04 October 2013: <<http://www.complexmag.ca/music/2013/03/lil-wayne-says-that-he-suffers-from-epilepsy>>).

4. Arrests that appear especially vindictive and targeted, and of the type dished out to the Beatles and the Stones in the 1960s and '70s. Wayne was arrested for drug possession when his tour bus was searched in 2008, as well as for smoking marijuana in NYC in 2007; the weapons charge was for a firearm registered to his manager, which was in a bag by his person. For these offences Wayne has served a year in prison (March 2010–2011) at Riker's Island plus 36 months probation.

5. Wayne's February 2010 sentencing was delayed due to "eight root canals, the replacement of several tooth implants, as well as the addition of a few new implants and work on his remaining original teeth" (*Wikipedia*, accessed 04 October 2013: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lil_Wayne>). If you've seen his gold grill, then you've probably also realised Wayne's dentist is as wealthy as he is.

at least, at the extreme of two worlds, wherein conspicuous consumption and its display of *bling* intersects with the supposed authenticity of illegalised behaviours and substances, ‘Lil Wayne had become “not a human”. But if not a human, what is Wayne? The first lines of the absurdist “Gonerrhea”, the album’s opening track, ran:

I am not a human
Shout to all my moon men
Yeah they call me tune
Got them bitches tuned in
It's a crazy world so I stay in mine
And niggas don't cross the line
Niggas don't cross the line
— Lil' Wayne, “Gonerrhea”, *I Am Not A Human Being* (2010)⁶

Shouts out to the moon men — because “niggas don’t cross the line”. But Wayne had crossed the line, adopting an increasingly bizarre, alien persona that left the “niggas” — that self-reflexively cynical/empowering term that still carries its shock value of ghetto realism and heteronormative masculinity despite its widespread proliferation within pop culture — on the other side of the line. That line divided world-following from world-making: Wayne had decided to “fuck the world” — another line with a double entendre all-too-evident to followers of Wayne’s strange-brand of heterosexist egoism⁷ — by

6. What to make of this track title, “Gonerrhea”? Goner: gone, left Earth, departed to the Moon. One speculates that becoming a Moon Man leads to a disease of words, an infection of heteroglossia, that may affect the teeth (see above) just as it translates through the phallogocentrism of hip-hop: “life’s a bitch / better yet a dumb broad . . . p(l)us-size nigga’ I don’t want your gonerrhea”. Perhaps with “Gonerrhea” one bites off more than one can chew; it was, for a brief time, in contention for this thesis title. It was dutifully abandoned.

7. A heterosexism that strains of Afrofuturism are unfortunately not alien to. It is also the case (as in the general historical conditions of a patriarchal 20th century whose structural, socioeconomic and institutional sexism have yet to be overcome) that a predominance of masculine figures reign throughout Afrofuturism, even as the latter is at its most compelling when it bends gender, renders sexuality alien, and disrupts the “humanist” circuits of sexism and phallogocentrism. Yet Afrofuturism, as I hope to demonstrate, is not a “man’s, man’s world” (to echo James Brown): I will turn to Janelle Monáe, for example, in chapter two. From the beginning, Afrofuturist science fiction has strongly featured women authors — Octavia Butler, Nalo Hopkinson, Jewelle Gomez, Evie Shockley, Tananarive Due, Nisi Shawl, and Linda Addison, to name a few (see Thomas 2000) — as has Afrofuturist scholarship: Sheree Thomas, Alondra Nelson, Lisa Yaszek, Ytasha Womack.

creating another version of it, one that was as equally perverse (some might say offensively so) as it was delightfully strange. But across the line presents a paradox: if no longer human, Wayne could equally be considered a product, a brand, or an object of the state, subject to selling, speculation, and incarceration, just as the historical status of enslaved dehumanisation suggests. Wayne's public displays of *bling* might suggest this reading: that Lil' Wayne had become a commodity, with gold teeth shining, a thing among things.⁸ "Bling" signifies with style the ornamental role of conspicuous luxury items in their sparkling magnificence — signs of power and accumulated riches historically denied African-Americans. If not human, had Wayne become an object of bling, his own dehumanised brand?

Perhaps, but not all — for across the line, no longer human, Lil' Wayne was also no longer a "nigga": he was now a Moon Man. What did Wayne mean by this? Given the historical usage of "nigga" as a dehumanising term, deployed within white racist discourse to signify the supposedly subhuman status of African Americans, it would appear that "niggas" are already objects, *qua* the ultimate commodity as historically traded slave labour.⁹ If no longer a "nigga", had not Wayne suggested he had crossed another line, and not that of the objectification and commodification already contained within the very meaning of "nigga"? Had not Wayne proffered an-other identification to his dehumanisation, an extra-terrestrial subjectivity, precisely by *becoming a Moon Man*?

There have been prior declarations of the unhuman among Afrodiasporic musicians, artists, writers,

8. Paul Gilroy suggests that commodified black bodies are *branded* — the term here does double-duty — in an enthusiastic conformity to "wider social patterns" so as to disclose "the deepest, most compelling truths of the privatized ontology within" (2004: 22): that on the inside, we're all commodities under planetary capitalism.

9. Hence the paradox of the global commodification of "race": that while "imaginary blackness" is exported as the invaluable face of American pop culture, it remains devalued under racialised hierarchies: "this hyper-visibility supplies the signature of a corporate multiculturalism in which some degree of visible difference from an implicit norm may be highly prized", writes Paul Gilroy, yet these "exceptionably beautiful and glamorous but nonetheless racialised bodies do nothing to change the everyday forms of racial hierarchy" (Gilroy 2004: 21–22). Nonetheless the pop proliferation of black bodies creates anxiety about older racial hierarchies just as it engenders "new hatreds" through the "disturbing inability to maintain" the former (Gilroy 2004: 22).

and black bodies in general that take on alien, android, machinic, and otherworldly becomings. Many disownings of the Earthly and the human have been wildly public. Take George Clinton's Dr. Funkenstein, spacefunk master of funk bands Parliament and Funkadelic, and their UFO-descended Mothership Connection. Declaring outer space his home and pioneering the wear of space-suited adult diapers, Clinton did to his audiences in the 1970s what Wayne declared to do to the world.¹⁰ Or, take hip-hop emcee Dr. Octagon, the alien alter-ego of Kool Keith of the Ultramagnetic MCs, whose lyrics as an alien gynecologist from Jupiter in the 1990s suggested that human bodies offered strange sites of orificial eroticism.¹¹ Or, take androgynous disco diva Grace Jones, who in 1985 declared herself a "Slave to the Rhythm", her gender-bending fashion and crew-cut hairstyles accompanying menacing acts of athletic sadomasochism and animalistic becomings. Like these predecessors and many more from jazz musicians Sun Ra to John Coltrane, 1980s electro-vocoder trio The Jonzun Crew to Detroit electro outfit Drexciya, Wayne had managed to alienate himself into the "offworld musicians division" of the Afrofuturist Alien Nation. His own camp, lazily orbiting Earth, *leanin'* in low gravity in the grey zone of *bling*: the Moon Men.

• • •

Other Planes of There

The displaced years

Memory calls them that

They were never was then

10. In short, one might say they both "star-fucked" it.

11. Dr. Octagon, the "alien gynecologist", provides an intriguing case of *allegorising* the misogyny evident throughout *bling* hip-hop even as his alien becoming *transforms* allegorical heterosexism into alien eroticism. On his 1996 self-titled LP — which in some world regions was titled "Dr. Octagonecologist" — alien-erotic skits segue between equally odd tracks of rapid fire, staccato flow. Things come to a head in "Visit to the Gynecologist", where the "good doctor" pretends to be a female practitioner for an examination that enacts, in high falsetto, a stereotypical male fantasy of pedagogical finger-probing — until, that is, the doctor advises moving on to a "squash" and a "caterpillar". The general form of this argument concerning the transformation/becoming of allegory will be explored in chapter two.

Memory scans the void
 And from the future
 Comes the wave of the greater void
 A pulsating vibration
 A sound span and bridge
 To other ways
 other planes of there.
 — Sun Ra, “Other Planes of There” (1966–1980) (2005a: 120)

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Afrofuturism, I contend, postulates the conceptual thoughtware of its own production: its *MythSciences*, *chronopolitics*, and *concepttechnics*. By explicating Afrofuturism through its network of concepts, I outline its production of counter-realities and explore its performative unEarthings of the grounds of human being. By tracing the Afrofuturist exodus from the category of the human, I detail

12. I deploy the term “whitewashed” to signal the persistent erasure of blackness from various supposed universalisms, be they futures, histories, philosophies, concepts, representations, or practices. Such “whitewashing” occurs as much in the production of an apparently “neutral” set of questions, philosophemes, histories, trajectories or assumptions just as much as it takes place in narratives or representations devoid of peoples of colour.

how its practices adopt and disseminate alien, android, machinic, and otherworldly becomings.

The texts, performances, becomings, and arts of Afrofuturism all suggest, if not explicitly explore, the following, all of which will be iterated throughout this thesis:

Afrofuturism is a way of remaking the world, by way of an unearthly, otherwise, or uncanny becoming of blackness that, in the same moment, unsettles blackness as it does the figure of the human in general. These manifold becomings at once both represent yet transform the coordinates of blackness — and the human.

Thus it also suggests an entirely *other* tradition to Eurocentric modernism: that “we have never been human”, that the “modern subject” commences with the alienated and unhuman, in the figure of the first robot, the “slave”, as constitutive to the figure of the human and its enlightened ideal, the citizen.¹³

Or: Afrofuturist becomings explore pathways of exodus from the white mythologies of humanism, refusing to abide by the raciological hierarchies enforced by the institutions of slavery and colonialism. It is the human race, that as the master race, Afrofuturism abandons in its movements of becoming alien.

Afrofuturism views subjectivity, temporality, and the world itself as unreal constructs — fictive but enforced “mythsystems” — and thus, subject to intervention, to MythSciences wrought by any means impossible: becomings, counter-realities, historical revisionings, futurist topias, and temporal

13. I am riffing here upon Bruno Latour’s (infamous) book title, *We Have Never Been Modern* (1993). Latour’s primary thesis, that many so-called “pre-modern” peoples did not distinguish nature from science, and that “modernity” in effect attempted to erase this constitutive relationship by positing a nonexistent divide between nature and science, is complicated as well as explicated by Afrofuturism, the latter which explicitly retrieves figures of the past into a futurist present: Sun Ra’s concept of “MythScience” and the Afrofuturist use of “myth” to reconstruct “reality” undertake the kinds of operations that Latour calls for. But modernity has a much more limited effect than Latour supposes: Afrofuturism already exists as such a practice that stretches back through the “modern” past (see also Tāl 1996). Following the work of Baucom (2005), I will suggest a second displacement: that “modernity” begins with the black Atlantic slave, and not the 18th century French revolutionary subject.

interventions.

Afrofuturism permeates through boundaries of genre. Afrofuturism does not have need of a marginalised genre or particular mode. Rather, it arises as a permutation of “alien alterity” *within* a particular domain, irrupting its boundaries, overtaking the coordinates by which blackness is read as representing ghetto realism or as a racialised “community”, transforming its constrained allegories into figures of outer space, alien alterity, time travel, otherworldly or low-down dirty becomings.



Figure 1. Alien Wayne mixtape cover (2008)

Let us return to Alien Wayne, who reappears within hip-hop as the alien-other to his former self. Beyond a genre, beyond the constraints of representing or allegorising the “real” conditions of blackness, Afrofuturism is wired into a transformation of the subject itself: a becoming-Afrofuturist, a becoming-alien, as Lil’ Wayne’s title suggests — *I Am Not A Human Being*. There is no doubt from the title that Lil’ Wayne disassociates with the category of the human. He dehumanises. He becomes a Moon Man. But what is a Moon Man? What has he become, then, if not human?

Perhaps a widely-distributed fan mixtape from 2008 suggests a creative reply: *Alien Wayne* (see fig. 1). Lil’ Wayne poses in white shirt and trucker hat on the cover, hands shoved in his pocket and head tilted to the side, dreads dangling over his shoulders, as if to confront the viewer with the evidence of his alien becoming: his glowing green eyes. His pupils are completely obscured by the green glow, while a cross hangs from his neck, raising all manner of questions — as with Sun Ra, the ancient black alien jazz Pharaoh — concerning the relationship between the alien and the divine. Wayne is surrounded by an electroplasm of green and blue energy.¹⁴ Is the floating robot controlling Wayne with its wiry tentacles, or Wayne the robot by way of his electric field? Is this one of Wayne’s new alien associates? The robo-alien lets on little behind its triangular green eyes. The cover raises more questions than it answers. But if Lil’ Wayne is “not a human being” by his own admission, he is undoubtedly “Alien Wayne”, just as his transition, and his lyricism, reflect and transform the ongoing transformations of Afrofuturism.

Endtroducing..... Afrofuturism¹⁵

14. Though I often inadvertently coin strange words throughout, “electroplasm” is the name of a psychedelic goa track from legendary trance outfit Shpongle, from their 2009 album *Ineffable Mysteries From Shpongleland* (Twisted Records, TWSCD36). Its semantic combination in “electro” of two vectors of meaning — electricity and the style of broken beats known as electro (closely related to hip-hop) — with the ineffably and mysterious force of “plasm” also aptly describes Lil’ Wayne’s ontogenetic condition.

As a concept applied retroactively to disparate movements of art, aesthetics, literature, and speculative thought of the Afrodiaspora, Afrofuturism and its practitioners can be traced through the development of 20th century music from jazz to funk, disco to hip-hop, as well as in film, dance, the visual arts, and literature including speculative philosophy, poetry, and occult tracts, and notably in science fictional and speculative literature dating back to the late 19th century.¹⁶ Afrofuturist scholarship has likewise traced its mythologies, theosophies, and sonic traditions to west African practices of cyclic temporality, outer space origin myths and worldviews that complicate the Western binaries of nature and science, fiction and fact.¹⁷ But in the criss-crossings of the Afrodiaspora, and in particular of hegemonic Eurocentric culture, Afrofuturism shuns “traditional” — as in racialised — assumptions of black identity as counter to technology, transformation, and futurity, at the same time that it challenges assumptions of how subjectivity, technology, race, and temporality operate.¹⁸

In this thesis, I seek to explicate four axes of Afrofuturism: temporality and subjectivity (complicated

15. *Endtroducing....* is the title of DJ Shadow’s debut studio album (1996), infamous for sampling nearly the entire back catalogue of canonical funk, soul, and R&B into a blend of downtempo and instrumental hip-hop. Its title suggests precisely the temporal movement I outline below for Afrofuturism: of a retrieval (in this case, sampling) of the past so as to alter the futurist coordinates of the present. Sampling, as a technology, does not merely allegorise Afrofuturist cyclic temporality: it is bound up with it, at the level of *tekhne*, in which sampling and recording technologies are an effect of cyclical *chronos* indissociable from *mnemotechnics*.

16. Lisa Yaszek, a scholar of Afrofuturist science fiction, writes that “Afrofuturist stories also begin to appear in [the 19th century], and, more often than not, were also written by respectable mainstream writers including African Americans Martin Delany, Charles Chesnutt, and Edward Johnson. Much like their white counterparts, 19th-century Afro-futurists wrote in a diverse range of fantastic and proto-science fictional forms” (2006: 44). Yaszek suggests that science fiction has an alternate, Afrodiasporic history that, like Mary Shelley’s *Frankstein* (1818), posits science fiction as a speculative literature critical to white male Eurocentrism and its technological forces. Womack likewise embraces 19th century African-American authors as Afrofuturists, characterising Delany, George S. Schuyler, W.E.B. Du Bois, Chesnutt and others as “well-meaning activists who, for fleeting moments, turned to speculative fiction to articulate their frustrations and hopes for the future” (2013: 121).

17. Such traces are performed by Afrofuturist “mythologies” themselves, including speculations upon the Sirius C star rituals of the Dogon, who live in the central plateau region of Mali in western Africa. The Dogon’s ritual connections to the Sirius star system (unviewable to the human eye, and later proven by the Hubble space telescope) were observed by French anthropologists Griaule and Dieterlen (1986), later popularised for the New Age in Robert Temple’s 1970s bestseller *The Sirius Mystery* (1998). As well as mentioning the Dogon (and its problematic Western “mythologisation” as proof of ancient alien contact), Ytasha Womack discusses the work of Dr. Malidoma Somé, scholar of religious studies and a Dagara shaman from Burkina Faso. In his works Somé explores the Dagara worldview that “emphasize[s] the power of thought to create reality” (2013: 79). Somé connects the need for MythScience to unfolding futurity: “where ritual is absent, the young ones are restless or violent, there are no real elders, and the grown-ups are bewildered. The future is dim” (1997: 12; see also Somé 1994; Somé 1999).

18. Alondra Nelson argues this point in her “Introduction” to the Afrofuturism issue of *Social Text* (2002), the first special issue of a Journal dedicated to the topic. In a quote I will return to in chapter one, she writes that “Blackness gets constructed as always oppositional to technologically driven chronicles of progress” (2002: 1).

by becoming), blackness (complicated by “race” and its raciology) and technology (complicated by mnemotechnics). These pairings are presented here as interchangeable: all four terms are implicated when discussing Afrofuturist concepts of temporality, subjectivity, blackness, or technology. This dissertation is occupied with explicating the intersection and transformation of these concepts within — and by — Afrofuturism. Though I will deploy these terms to articulate general concepts, their specific Afrofuturist nomenclature will be explored as concepts of their own standing. To these four, Afrofuturism complicates clear-cut distinctions and introduces three, their portmanteaus signalling the constitutively hybrid aspects of various conceptual operators within Afrofuturism: *concepttechnics*, *MythScience*, and *chronopolitics*.¹⁹ Though these “concepts” will be explored in detail throughout what follows — it is the conceptual labour of the dissertation to do so — I offer three brief definitions:

Chronopolitics undertakes a series of temporal interventions in the historical record of the past just as it constructs “AlterDestinies” of the future so as to destabilize the coordinates — the register of possibilities and impossibilities — of the present. It is also an analytic framework by which temporality is comprehended as cyclic, retroactive, and mutable.

MythScience is the science (or art, *technics*) of constructing “real myths”. MythScience is both a practice of creating MythSciences that are the “content” of a chronopolitical intervention (“fantasies in the false sense”), and an analytic tool that allows one to see through “reality” as a series of competing MythSystems (“fantasies in a real sense”).

Concepttechnics articulates the realm of the concept to that of technics, signalling their constitutive relation. It signifies the “conceptual technology” of objects, where “expertise is encoded on the

19. To these I will later add *Alien Nation* and *Armageddon been-in-effect* in exploring Afrofuturist worldviews.

microchip” but also where thought is (always) already “machinethought”, conditioned through transactions with technical objects (Eshun 1999: 03[031]). Conceptualtechnics is what Sun Ra calls “manufactured memory”: that cultural memory is scripted into technologies to serve the needs of its makers. One inherits cultural memory through transactions with technical objects that are mass-produced for consumption and everydayness. But conceptualtechnics also signals the practice of reconceptualising technologies through their repurposing: the deprogramming, remixing, deconstructing, or creative misuse of a technology scripted (conceptualised) to do something else.

To flesh out my compact definition of Afrofuturism and the claims above, I wish to turn to experimental filmmaker and multimedia artist Cauleen Smith. Smith is a former member of the Carbonist School, an Afrofuturist arts collective in Austin. Her definition of Afrofuturism is particularly useful in thinking-through the opening impact of *Alien Wayne*. Smith writes,

I would describe Afrofuturism as the experience of *cognitive estrangement* as manifested through sound, image, language, and form that so often defines or frames the mundane conditions and movements and generative thought in the African diaspora. It is not a moniker of identity or geography but a musical, literary, and art-historical movement — like creative music, postmodernism, or conceptual art (my italics, Smith, in Womack 2013: 138).

I first wish to point out the emphasis that Smith places upon *cognitive estrangement* — a theme of the uncanny, or the unEarthly, that I will return to in chapter six. Encountering this cognitive estrangement also means letting the text itself become, at points, estranged. Practically speaking, this will mean allowing Afrofuturist concepts to inhabit the “logic” of the text, to guide its twists and turns, and to imprint their unEarthliness upon its idiom. It will mean, at points, adopting — or rather being *abducted* by — an Afrofuturist worldview that renders unEarthly its objects, their problematics, contexts, and

scenes — an *offworlding* — so as to explicate the Afrofuturist production of MythSciences, as it were, from the inside-out of an alien orbit.

Second, I wish to nonetheless broaden and destabilize some of Smith's definition of Afrofuturism as an "art-historical movement": if Afrofuturism is a movement, it does not follow the narratives of most modern or avant-garde art-historical movements of the 20th century. It did not originate with a manifesto or within geographic or nationalist boundaries. It has had no associations or centres of influence. Though such organising activities are now taking place with the dissemination of the term, the "origins" of Afrofuturism remain diverse and diasporic, dispersed across territories and times. Though Afrofuturism tends to be associated with the 20th and into the 21st century, and like all modern art movements, proliferated with the invention of recording and telecommunications technologies, the concepts explored and expressed in Afrofuturism repurpose older and otherworldly eras — ancient Egypt, antebellum slavery, other planets — as well as imagining ones still-to-come. This is precisely because Afrofuturism is as much a retroactive activity of historical revisioning as a futurist project: it re-replaces its origins in the ancient past, introduces competing timelines, and projects counter-myths to the Eurocentric "historical" narratives that likewise have sought to claim the past for their own purposes of cultural authentication, or to erase the past entirely so as to undertake a unidirectional "futurism".²⁰

The "roots" of Afrofuturism in Afrodiasporic occult, theosophical, musical, religious, cultural, and philosophical practices remain to be traced; the hundreds of esoteric pamphlets and tracts in Sun Ra's library alone suggest he shaped his Kemetian Afrofuturology from a diverse range of futurist,

20. Nearly every nation-state traces its originary authenticity to a founding, exclusive group from antiquity. John Szwed, biographer of Sun Ra, notes that "The British, for instance, long fancying themselves somehow or other linked to the Jews, found their first justification in *Lectures on our Israelitish Origin* by John Wilson" (1998: 71).

spiritualist, and occult sources dating back, at least in print, to the early 19th century.²¹ Sun Ra's biographer, John Szwed, describes Ra's readings in the ancient past as unveiling the historical record as a site of contesting claims: "The ancient world, [Ra] was learning, was less a place than a myth" (1998: 71). In the context of Ra's occult research that began in 1950s Chicago, it is worth noting that "the past" had been claimed by various Eurocentric and white origin narratives; thus interpretations that emphasised Africanist civilizations and dominions were "a competing mythology which white people had to at once suppress and demonize. It was another history of the world . . ." (Szwed 1998: 72–73).

Repurposing such an alternate history so as to revision an alternate future becomes a crucial operation of Afrofuturism. Ra's research suggests, however, that such revisioning operations are not new to the 20th century. The concept of Afrofuturism, in this respect, invented retroactively, ought to be extended in reverse through time, matching the time travel — the interventionist and revisionist history — already conducted by its practitioners such as Ra.

Origins of Afrofuturism, after the fact. With the coining of "Afrofuturism" in 1993 by cultural critic Mark Dery (1994a), its terminology, discourse, and definition have been retroactively applied to a disparate set of past Afrodiasporic practices that have, in true Afrofuturist fashion, called a movement into becoming. Well into the second decade of the 21st century, Afrofuturism is now manifesting as the futurist arts movement it never was. Various contemporary artists, such as Smith, call themselves "Afrofuturists", while figures considered to be foundational, such as Sun Ra, never did — though I

21. In his extensive biography of Sun Ra, Szwed discusses Ra's library and reading habits alongside the research activities of Thmei Research and the El Saturn group; see (1998: 62–73). For a provisional listing of Ra's library, the reading list of his 1971 course taught at Berkeley entitled "The Black Man in the Cosmos", and books mentioned by Szwed, see Geerken's compilation in (Ra 2005b). For his polemical broadsheets, see (Ra 2006). All of these texts suggest that 20th century Afrofuturism draws from theosophic and occult traditions dating back to the 18th century, as well as Afrodiasporic cultural practices dating back to the peoples first enslaved, which is to say, to the diverse regions and peoples of western Africa.

imagine Ra would have embraced the term, had he lived to see its conceptualisation.²²

Drawing attention to the strategic and retroactive deployment of Afrofuturism as a conceptual and historical descriptor coallates a number of positions concerning Afrodiasporic futurisms, on the one channel, and underscores the perpetual transformation of “Afrfuturism” as a concept, on the other. We are caught in what Fredric Jameson, speaking of the very problem with “words” that threaten to become social theories, describes as “a kind of retroactive paradox in which it is the articulation that produces the afterimage of the object it ends up naming (but which did not, of course, exist in that form before the name)” (2010: 86). Yet this problematic of retroactivity, as Jameson suggests, is constitutive of all language, and though when elevated to the determining force of a social theory it risks reification, it remains my task here to ensure that Afrofuturism does not become a reified *social* theory.

The art of putting together Afrofuturism must be accompanied, then, by its inverse movement, contained within the Afrofuturist chronopolitical gesture itself: the construction of Afrofuturism leads to a deconstruction of its “conditions” and “effects”. So though any reading of Afrofuturism is constitutively, in the words of Jameson, playing “this constructivist quasi-temporal paradox of the positing of an object by way of what conceptually brings it into being in the first place” (2010: 86), it is also the case that Afrofuturism is already operating in a retroactive *modus operandi* as its chronopolitics. The examples I give in chapters three and four will read the “conditions” of Afrofuturism in slavery and

22. Graffiti artist, sculptor and emcee RAMM:ΣLL:ZΣΣ refused an epidermalisation of the term, writing that “black as a culture has nothing to do with it” (Galli 2009: 115). Paul D. Miller sees Afrofuturism tied to a notion of the “permanent underclass” and other concerns that have since been surpassed “by the culture” (Miller and van Veen 2014). I see both critical points as inclusive *within* the signifier of “Afrfuturism”, suggesting, again, the need for a revaluation of its terms. That Afrofuturism is not irrevocably tied to black bodies (or “culture”) is one of its trajectories, an effect inclusive to its tendency toward posthuman and alien becomings. Miller writes that “I speak of Afro-Futurism in the past tense because I think that the culture at large caught up to and bypassed many of the issues it was dealing with” (Miller and van Veen 2014). Yet this is to assume that Afrofuturism had a cohesiveness that Miller erstwhile rejects, writing that “It seemed like Afrofuturism just didn’t have a cohesive situation to have music, art, and literature evolve from” (Miller and van Veen 2014). Thus Afrofuturism appears to be caught in a paradox, of neither being cohesive enough to evolve, yet all the same attached to a past since surpassed. Paul D. Miller has just recently (as of November 2013) sat on a panel of “Afrfuturists”, so perhaps the issue is moot.

colonialism. But such historical conditions are posited retroactively by Afrofuturist concepts that produce a worldview of slavery as an effect. These concepts include “alien abduction”, in which the lived experience of the eschaton as “Armageddon been-in-effect” is constitutive of “Alien Nation”, the latter which both structures an offworld belonging at the same time that it destructures the ethnonationalist grounds of being.

Allies. My approach to Afrofuturism traverses common theoretical territory with that of postcolonial theorist Homi K. Bhabha who, in conversation with John Comaroff in 1998, discusses the strategy by which the concept of “postcoloniality” took shape:

Postcoloniality, our defining term, became less a name or a topic, and more a way of making connections or articulations across a range of topics and themes, a locus for theoretical and political reflection rather than a label (Bhabha and Comaroff 2002: 30).

On the surface, this comment could just as well apply to Afrofuturism: “Afrofuturism” is the means of *activating* connections and articulations, of drawing the links in a network that arises from — but is not contained to — the dispersed Afrodiasporic cultures of the black Atlantic. It is thus the “locus for theoretical and political reflection”: Afrofuturism is a contact zone of concepttechnics.

The second theoretical intersection with Bhabha occurs over the question of temporality. Bhabha, discussing his theoretical alignment with psychoanalysis in the work of Frantz Fanon, goes on to explicate the temporal retroactivity of psychoanalysis — its “time-lag effect” — that, interestingly enough, could just as well be traced from *Afrofuturist* assemblages as those of Freud and his successors. In shorthand, Bhabha explains the nature of psychoanalytic temporality as “the fact that the moment of an event may not be the moment of the meaningfulness of the event. That the ‘agency’ of an action may

have to be deciphered, in a time-lag, at some distance from its performance” (2002: 30). Bhabha’s statement could apply to a number of tropes; however what it outlines (and this is also Fanon’s emphasis) is a return of the repressed: that the “meaning” of an event may irrupt later, in different forms, thereby recalling one’s attention to a hidden, erased, or forgotten past. And that by doing so, by reactivating a past through its form(s) of the repressed, it changes the operating conditions of the present, altering the unfolding of the future within it.

Fanon himself — the revolutionary psychoanalyst from Martinique whose work has provided the theoretical groundwork for Bhabha, Paul Gilroy, and a legion of postcolonial scholarship — could likewise be read as an Afrofuturist. I will attempt to do so in chapters four and five. His analytic practice was devoted to handling the after-effects of centuries of colonial racism as well as the trauma of revolutionary warfare. There is a second general point to be made here as well. That Fanon was trained in psychology and psychoanalysis, attending the seminars of Jacques Lacan in Paris, suggests a constitutive cultural hybridity to Afrofuturism — one in which the Afrodiaspora, and Afrofuturism, are not at odds to the “West”, geographically, culturally, or theoretically, but rather, that both are mutually constitutive. This point can be emphasised in multiple ways through multiple objects: it is the effect, of course, of European colonisation and imperialism, but also of the diasporic exchanges that have fomented belonging in translocal and transcultural networks. I will emphasize the constitutive hybridity of transnational “origins” throughout this thesis, in particular as hybridity distinguishes Afrofuturism from the nationalist and ethnocentric movements of Afrocentrism and Negritude.²³

I would like to underscore Bhabha’s remarks on temporality, however, by emphasizing an

23. Though these distinctions (as I will demonstrate) are not clear cut: there are Afrofuturist trajectories to Afrocentrism and Negritude, and vice-versa.

Afrofuturist reading — in brief — so as to introduce the question of Afrofuturist temporality, and to disrupt the usual priority of Eurocentric referentiality as authenticating theoretical discourse. Speaking of postcoloniality, as a “locus . . . rather than a label”, Bhabha continues:

Such a constellated conjunction [postcoloniality] is precisely the kind of event, psychic or social, that psychoanalysis helps you to work with or work through. For psychoanalysis never just attends to the past-in-the-present, but catches up with a proleptic past, *a past literally dying to be born in the present so that we may survive the future* (my italics, Bhabha and Comaroff 2002: 30).

Afrofuturism, in effect, looks toward the past to stage a rebirth — not of *the* past, *the past in its truth-claim*²⁴ — but the past as it returns in its alien form, a “proleptic past”, a delayed and transformed past, its uncanny resemblance to something indiscernible hinted in the shadows of the approaching future, the past as a repressed other that is *activated* through an “agency”, fully suspended in quotation marks, a past that is reimagined, that is revisioned, rewritten, reinterpreted, precisely for the reshaping of the unfolding coordinates of the future. But unlike Bhabha’s minimal requirements of survival — “Survival is the agency of the everyday, the strategic actions and activities of the group or the individual of major events or grand narratives” (2002: 30–31) — or rather, adding to his minimal requirements as a necessary component, Afrofuturism sees *futurology* as indispensable to survival: there can be no agency of the everyday, no survival, without futurism, without addressing the way in which tending to the past unfolds alternate futures, and alternate *futurisms*. What has been erased from the past by colonialism and its epistemic structures of hegemonic white racism are the untold futures of the colonised: alternate futures and their *futurisms*. Thus, what this thesis also attempts to demonstrate, through its implicit and

24. Indeed, such an attempt to authenticate the one, true past is precisely the kind of historical revisioning operation that distinguishes Afrocentrism, and its (polemical but serious) attempt to rewrite the past, and that of Afrofuturism, the latter which sees reality (“*the world*”) as a construction of myths.

at times explicit conversation with theoretical approaches prevalent in “postcolonial” scholarship,²⁵ is how Afrofuturism alters the coordinates of postcolonial approaches — how the former’s futurology suggests a *necessary* dimension to the latter’s “politics of survival”. Not just the politics of survival, then, but its *chronopolitics* of becoming.

My turn to chronopolitics here is also, in part, a response to postcolonial theorist Paul Gilroy, whose work — in particular *Between Camps: Nations, Cultures, and the Allure of Race* (2004) — I will return to, time and again, as an interlocutor. Gilroy’s theorisation of “the black Atlantic” is integral to the sociogeography of Afrofuturism. The black Atlantic, Gilroy argues, is an Afrodiasporic network of belonging, a postnationalist (or rather, pre-nationalist) cultural formation of shared history and identity communicated through call-and-response practices of music and art (1993). Even though separated by geography, nation, and language, Gilroy argues that music and art, in its remixing and versioning, distributes a shared sense of belonging throughout the territories impacted by Atlantic slavery. Gilroy has also investigated strategies of antiracism that turn to futurology. In his (still contentious) *Between Camps* (otherwise known as *Against Race*), Gilroy argues that raciology as a discourse must be left behind to the 20th century. Studying what he argues is the “single, complex structure of modern solidarity” indicated in the constitutive relationship between racism, nationalism, and fascism (2004: x), Gilroy undertakes two gestures that I repeat, or rather affirm, here. First, he elaborates “an alternative constellation of concepts” to raciology, so as “to accelerate the de-naturing of ‘race’” (2004: xiv). Concepttechnics, MythScience, and chronopolitics provoke such de-naturing. Second, Gilroy turns to

25. Granted, the supposed unity of the “postcolonial” theoretical field has diversified into approaches inclusive of diaspora studies, migration studies, whiteness studies, and critical race theory, among other refinements. The proliferation of scholarship is impressive and immense. As a preliminary gesture, my approach tends to certain canonical, theoretical texts, so as to situate Afrofuturism in conversation with key frameworks.

concepts such as planetary humanism, infrahumanity, and nanopolitics, all suggesting coordinates of a general *futurology* whose goal is “the dangerous gesture” of “bringing the struggle against race out of the future and into the present” (2004: xv).²⁶ This phrase ought to be re-read: not the struggle against *racism*, but against *race*, as a discourse, a marker, and an identity. I will find myself affirming the trajectory of this argument, but only to unEarth it, by posing the Afrofuturist question: is *planetary humanism* enough?

In Gilroy’s conclusion, after analysing various “camps” or configurations of racism, nationalism, and fascism, Gilroy turns to the problematic of the present and its dangerous gesture: “making raciology appear anachronistic — placing it squarely in the past — now requires careful judgement as to what histories of our heterocultural present and our cosmopolitan future should entail” (2004: 335). In short, Gilroy turns to Afrofuturology: he suggests that “we need self-consciously to become more future-oriented. We need to look toward the future and to find political languages in which it can be discussed” (2004: 335). Gilroy hints at such a language in the “music and musicians” of the “black vernacular” who have turned to “extraterrestriality, futurology, and fictions of techno-science”, precisely because “denying the future and the right to be future-oriented became an integral part of the way white supremacism functioned during and after the slave system” (2004: 337). Gilroy is, in effect, suggesting that Afrofuturism offers a political language. I will return to, and re-read, similar passages in the Conclusion, and elsewhere, when reflecting upon strategies of futurology. However, I wish to position this thesis, in part, as undertaking the “self-conscious exploration” of not only future-oriented practices, but as advancing the complex undertaking of chronopolitics, concepttechnics, and MythScience — strategies of

26. Planetary humanism is the futurology of an “emphatically postracial humanism”; infrahumanity signals dehumanisation but also potential becomings; nanopolitics goes underneath the skin of biopolitics to genomics (Gilroy 2004: 37, 202). Thus all three concepts signify a nexus of practices and technologies that can both perpetuate as well as defeat raciology.

Afrofuturism that have already developed the political languages Gilroy is seeking.²⁷

Cognitive Estrangement: Chronopolitics and MythScience

... that (by contradiction, I mean) is how the world moves: Not like an arrow, but a boomerang.
(Beware of those who speak of the *spiral* of history; they are preparing a boomerang. Keep a steel helmet handy.)

— Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (1947: 10)

On record in the Chicago Arts Archive, Smith defines the temporal register of Afrofuturism — and its efficacy — as “speculating about the past and speculating on the future while reconfiguring the present tense” (Smith, in Womack 2013: 137). This definition accurately captures the retroactivity of Afrofuturism I have elaborated above. It is also an increasingly prevalent concept throughout Afrofuturist scholarship and its arts. Ytasha Womack, who has written about Afrofuturism in popular culture, likewise reiterates its temporal “force”. Womack writes that “Afrofuturists are constantly recontextualizing the past in a way that changes the present and the future” (2013: 158). I draw attention to Womack’s definition so as to contextualise my investigation into Afrofuturist temporality, insofar as my own starting point is not that of a philosophical inquiry (though it will become one in chapters four and five), but rather commences from observing — in the cultural arena, popular discourse, and the arts and expressions of Afrofuturism, from music to speculative theory — the manifestation of an explicit temporal intervention that has theorised itself in terms of its retroactive revisioning, its cyclicity, and its futurist speculation.²⁸

27. Or was — granted that Gilroy crafted this call in the year 2000.

28. Of course, “philosophy”, the love of wisdom, could encompass all of these things in its peripatetic drifts. But I draw the narrow

Kodwo Eshun, in his 2003 essay on chronopolitics, outlines the dynamics of one of Afrofuturism's signature operations, its temporal politics:

By creating temporal complications and anachronistic episodes that disturb the linear time of progress, these [Afro]futurisms adjust the temporal logics that condemned black subjects to prehistory. Chronopolitically speaking, these revisionist historicities may be understood as a series of powerful competing futures that infiltrate the present at different rates (Eshun 2003: 297).

The activity of chronopolitics, of revisioning history so as to infiltrate the present with “powerful competing futures”, requires the production of alternate temporalities. The content of these alternate temporalities — of a revisionist past, a competing future, or a counter-reality — is known as *MythScience*. Though I will demonstrate how its portmanteau collapses the Western division between myth and science (in chapter five), I wish to provisionally observe the general Afrofuturist paradigm at work: that reality, in all its temporal modes, is made up of competing myths; that intervening within one alters the *others*; and that there is a “science” to doing so, or one might also say, given the constitutive hybridity of *MythScience*, an *art*, or *technics* to doing so.

What I call “envisioning” — refiguring the past or future — takes place within a political framework, according to Eshun's term. The “political” terrain here is evidently unconventional, and should not be read as bearing upon the field of politics. What signifies its political meaning is the retroactive efficacy of its force, insofar as chronopolitics shifts the coordinates of the possible and the impossible. What was hitherto impossible becomes possible once the past is rethought, performed at odds, retrieved otherwise, interpreted into alternate timelines, or inscribed with different meanings, its signs and symbols scratched to produce a different record. This production of difference constitutes its futurism:

contrast.

changing the past reveals hitherto closed, repressed, or hidden avenues of futurity, futures once thought “impossible”.

Impossibility is not a matter of logic — i.e., “we cannot build this, we do not have the technology” — but of paradox, a constitutive paradox that *sustains* Afrofuturism. Chronopolitics is an impossible gesture that reveals possibilities. That Sun Ra, for example, declares himself an ancient alien from Saturn, the return of a Kemetian Pharaoh from the future, situates precisely such a paradox, but it is also one in which the impossible is nonetheless effective at rendering itself real. Sun Ra “walks the Earth”.

Chronopolitics thus has a second dimension, which is where its retroactivity and envisioning operations undertake transformations of subjectivity, which is precisely where we encounter the likes of Sun Ra, or Alien Wayne. The cognitive estrangement of chronopolitics applied to the subject reveals its uncanniness — what I will read as its *unEarthly* dimension — whereby its androids, its ancient figures, and its aliens vibrate with the *je ne sais quoi* of unEarthly difference.

The implementation of chronopolitics calls for several analyses: that of the relationship between time and technics, the production of “reality” and “myth”, temporality and subjectivity — and in particular the deconstruction of raciology through Afrofuturist MythScience. It also calls to mind, as I have suggested, a postcolonial articulation of time. Here I wish to turn to a few statements (again) from Homi K. Bhabha, who draws attention to postcolonial temporality and its “perspective” — its production of subjectivity and culture, a worldview — as paradoxical, nonsensical, and irrational, in the eyes of the colonial order:

The disciplinary and temporal orders of Progress, Rule, Rationality, and the State become corrupted in the colonial and postcolonial conditions where they play a double, aporetic role: as

norms of value they make emancipatory claims, crucial to the definition of modern citizenship; however, as part of the power practices of the colonial state they create inequality, justice, and indignity. It is from the interstices of this paradoxical situation that the postcolonial perspective emerges. It unsettles the ubiquity, the ordinariness of those orders of common sense, those polarities of perception, that modernization has bequeathed on the rest of the world. So, for instance, *postcoloniality is open to the contingent and hybrid articulations of the sacred-in-the-secular, psychic fantasy as part of social rationality, the archaic within the contemporaneous* (my italics, Bhabha and Comaroff 2002: 24).

Afrofuturism, I contend, heightens the “unsettling” paradoxes of the “postcolonial perspective”. *Unsettling* is a particularly apt signifier, its associations and metonyms including *unEarth*ing, *unhomeliness*, and the *uncanny* — a chain of signifiers that I will deploy to disconnect Sun Ra from Heidegger in chapter six. Throughout this thesis I will deploy such signs to *unEarth* terrestrial markers of thought — to remind us of the *affective* and temporally *effective* force of Afrofuturism’s aliens, androids, time-travellers, and otherwise science fictional devices. In many respects, Afrofuturism accelerates Bhabha’s postcolonial condition into a chronopolitical force through diverse “exhuman”, alien, and offworld aesthetics,²⁹ as well as by way of a speculative mode of thought and media production that at times transgresses into movements and political formations that thematise, as Bhabha writes, the archaic within the contemporaneous and the sacred-in-the-secular. I wish to question, however, the role of modernity in Bhabha’s position: as Afrofuturism reinterprets its historical coordinates (notably by chronopolitically revisioning slavery) it also rewrites the Eurocentric narrative of modernity underlying Bhabha’s positioning of postcolonialism *against* modernity. Bhabha assumes an

29. I am tempted to write “posthuman”, but the term requires a denaturing from the Afrofuturist perspective, a deconstruction of its disembodiment fetishes and presumptions of a “liberal humanist subject” (as Hayles demonstrates (1999)) and of its white masculinity (as Weheliye suggests, in a critique of Hayles (2002)). Though I casually deploy the term at various points to mark the abandonment of or exodus from the human, I have not attempted to harness Afrofuturism underneath the umbrella of “posthumanism”. I mark my reserves concerning the term in the Inconclusive and in chapter one.

implicit acceptance of the Eurocentric definition of modernity and its Enlightenment narrative. What I wish to explore, through the work of Ian Baucom in chapter two (2005), is an Afrofuturist reading of modernity, in which the *black Atlantic slave* is modernity's initial figure as the ideal commodity form — and not the revolutionary subject of the French revolution. This would suggest that modernity, rather than being opposed to postcoloniality, has already been ex-habited by what is to come, which is to say, constitutively formed by its outsides from within. This incorporated exterior is the commodification of blackness. Or rather, the birth of modernity, and of the Enlightenment in general, only takes place because the figure *par excellence* of colonialism and modernity — the slave — *embodies* the birth of the commodity form. This commodity form, like modernity, persists in its repressed return through cyclic accumulations of sedimented time — this is one meaning of Public Enemy's "Armageddon been-in-effect" — that find their figure in embodiments like Lil' Wayne, as the "nigga" commodity form that Alien Wayne's Moon Men seek to implode through their extra-terrestrial exodus.

The "Other Otherness": Becomings-Alien

Movement out to behold kindred othernesses

Of and from other worlds

Cosmo-mysteries

Of an other otherness

That is not like to or of

Their themness

— Sun Ra, "The Other Otherness", versions 1 & 2 (2005a: 118–19)

A few brief remarks on black subjectivity in Afrofuturism, a topic thoroughly complex, and inhabiting simultaneous movements of representation and abstraction that I will suggest at once allegorise yet transform blackness.³⁰ Afrofuturism's cyclical temporality retrieves alternate "identities" from the past so as to remake futurist *becomings* ("of the subject") in the unfolding present. It is here that I would like to address *becoming*, which undertakes descriptive and conceptual labour in this thesis. The labour this term performs, wherever possible, is articulated to the Afrofuturist unfolding of its trajectory. It signifies a process that is something *other* than that of representation or allegory of "otherness", even as it deploys or utilises the latter to catalyse the former. Its becoming is *alien*. By "alien", I mean a becoming that abandons the category of the human toward "other otherness", where, thinking poetically with Sun Ra, the "other otherness" is a "movement out to behold kindred othernesses", enveloped in the "cosmo-mysteries / of an other otherness / That is not like to or of / Their themness" (2005a: 118–19).

The conceptual hardware presented here and the unfolding of its nomenclature will be explicated in the following chapters, where I will focus upon terms such as *becoming*, *alien*, *human*, *dehumanisation*, *transformation*, *consciousness*, *abandonment*, and *exodus*, in particular.

Becoming, I should note, does not imply the imposition of a pre-existent philosophical discourse, though I will here briefly turn to one, because it pre-exists nonetheless. So, to the source: the citation of

30. I note here two projects that transect with this one. Michelle M. Wright's *Becoming Black* (2004), and Richard Iton's *In Search of the Black Fantastic* (2010). Though Wright reads philosophers and theorists whom I will also traverse (notably Fanon), her concerns are with defining a "Black subjectivity as that which must be negotiated between the abstract and the real, or in theoretical terms, between the ideal and the material" (2004: 3). Though "becoming" might signify some resemblance in aims, my attempt to articulate the former *through* Afrofuturist concepts reveals practices unconstrained by theoretical polarisations of the ideal and the material. Iton writes a book that all but names Afrofuturism, touching upon Marcus Garvey, Sun Ra, and the Nation of Islam. He also argues that "blackness is a constitutively modern albeit unstable formation (i.e., its commitments to possibilities in excess of and beyond modernity)" (2010: 15) — a comradely statement to my own. However his project does not concern Afrofuturism specifically, nor does it seek to analyse "blackness" through theoretical concepts produced *by* the diasporic criss-crossings of the latter. It is, however, a companion text.

“becoming alien” from which the thought of thinking Afrofuturist becoming commenced. In Kodwo Eshun’s dazzling inventory of black Atlantic futurism, *More Brilliant Than The Sun*, that describes “sonic fictions” from Detroit techno to the “interstellar jazz” of John Coltrane — a text that, like Gilroy’s *Between Camps*, I return to time and again, dissecting its compact elucidations of Afrofuturism for their “absolute density”³¹ — Eshun writes:

Basic Instructions for Leaving Earth

To listen to [Sun] Ra is to be dragged into another sonar system, an omniverse of overlapping sonar systems which abduct you from Trad audio reality. By *becoming alien* himself, Ra turns you alien. Afro < > American history is white mythology Reject history and mythology. Assemble countermythologies. Assemble science from myth and vice versa (Eshun 1999: 09[158]).

Eshun is but one archival source from which this mix has been assembled. The above paragraph sets out the skeletal form of the stakes I have been elaborating here. It could be said that much of this thesis is an exegesis of Eshun’s unthought premises — though if so, in a thoroughly unfaithful manner to his polemical stance against the contextualisation of “AfroDiasporic futurism” in “social context”. I also question and complicate Eshun’s opposition of Afrofuturism to “Soul” (see chapter one) (1999: 00[-004]). However, I contests Eshun’s positions not from an opposing camp, but by leveraging and intensifying the concepts that are shaped within his text.³²

To return to *becoming alien*: the “source” of Eshun, of course, is constitutively hybrid: the appended “Thoughtware” of his text lists the various “sources” from which his citations and phrases emanate:

31. To borrow Fanon’s “black hole” description of consciousness, that I will turn to in chapters four and five (2008: 113).

32. Critics of Eshun often gloss over the heterogeneity of the text’s aphorisms and its near inexhaustible resource of thought while overemphasising its opening polemical pot-shots at “CultStud”. I will turn to one of Eshun’s more interesting critics, Alexander Weheliye, in chapter one.

record labels, album covers and track titles, liner notes, lyrics, manifestos, interviews, apocryphal asides and yes, a generous sampladelia³³ of media theorists and philosophers from Marshal McLuhan and Paul Virilio to (as one can by now anticipate) Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, where Eshun cites: “the brain is a population” (1999: 03[053]).³⁴ Eshun’s selectively samples Deleuze and Guattari to emphasise the multiplicity of the “I”, a heterogeneity of “myselfs” that he argues is characteristic of Afrofuturist becoming, a kind of proliferation of W.E.B. Du Bois’ “double-consciousness” into a population of multiselves:

At century’s start, W.E.B. DuBois analysed double consciousness as ‘this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others’. Mutation by high-pressure capitalism collapses psychic and social membranes, doubling and splitting you into the 2nd person. At Century’s End, Kool Keith protege and digital-age lyricist Sir Menelik exemplifies octagonal consciousness in the Information era. Adaptation to the Information-Image economy multiplies the sense of seeing, hearing, feeling yourselves in the 8th person (Eshun 1999: 03[041]).³⁵

I take two points from Eshun’s elaboration of “becoming alien” throughout *More Brilliant Than The Sun*. The first is that “becoming alien” does not name a singular becoming, but a population: its figures

33. Another Eshunite neologism: as in, the psychedelic effect of sampling, where the re-citation of a heterogeneous number of samples from diverse times and spaces creates a hallucinatory temporal effect (in text, audio, visual references, etc.).

34. The citation arrives from *A Thousand Plateaus*: “The brain is a population, a set of tribes tending towards to poles” (Deleuze 2000: 64). We may perhaps say something about the ethnocentrism of the sentence, but it is derived from an analysis of historical anthropologist André Leroi-Gourhan, who follows: “In Leroi-Gourhan’s analyses of the constitution of these two poles in the soup — one of which depends on the actions of the face, the other on the hand — their correlation or relativity does not preclude a real distinction between them” (2000: 64). The face and the hand are “reciprocal presuppositions”. We may begin to think the technicity of blackness from this vantage. To not swim too far into this soup, I will address Leroi-Gourhan — or Stiegler’s reading of Derrida’s reading of Leroi-Gourhan — in chapter six.

35. Paul D. Miller also addresses what he calls “multiplex consciousness” in his *Rhythm Science*, drawing from Charlie Mingus, the jazz composer, bandleader and double-bassist, citing his *Beneath the Underdog*: “In other words, I am three. One man stands forever in the middle, unconcerned, unmoved, watching, waiting to be allowed to express what he sees to the other two” (Mingus, in 2004: 61). Miller writes that “Mingus shows us a third path and, in a sense, continues the dialogue around how much people need ‘franchise identity’ to modulate their perceptions of themselves. Where Du Bois saw duality and Mingus imagined a trinity, I would say that the twenty-first century is so fully immersed in and defined by the data that surrounds it, we are entering an era of multiplex consciousness” (Miller 2004: 61). I read Du Bois as already structuring a “triplex” — his double consciousness assumes a mediating term, which is the Veil itself. Du Bois also proliferates in his work a heterogeneity of the “I”. At the level of technics, I will suggest that “consciousness” has already been disseminated through technicity in general (see chapters five and six). Technology only actualises the further “self” consciousness of this constitutive dissemination.

are unhuman, a designation of trajectories from animalia to android, machinic to organic that traverse all that is excluded from the imperial subject. The second is that “becoming” is a technique: it takes place in the reciprocal adaption and mutation to technology, including the “technology” of race that I will turn to below. Becoming is also not an allegory, imitation, or representation, though it necessarily deploys such techniques, a point I will address in chapter two.³⁶ It also acknowledges the inherent technicity of the human — and the technical construct of the (un)human — a point I will defend in chapter six. How this becoming adapts and mutates under conditions of absolute commodification of the self — slavery — suggests another trajectory for thinking becoming: that of becoming-unslaved, of deconstructing *dehumanisation*, which I attempt in chapter four, and of becomings that undertake various forms of *exodus*, in chapter five.

To the above paragraph we may echo another selective citation from Deleuze and Guattari: “becoming is always double, that which one becomes no less than the one that becomes” (2000: 305).³⁷ Becoming, then, suggests a constitutive duality, in which the self apprehends the self becoming, and the self becoming apprehends the former self. But this duality is reflected once again: the self apprehends itself in each term. Further, this duality is mediated by what Du Bois calls “the Veil” — the excluded middle, the “other world” — and thus disseminated, or as Deleuze and Guattari write, “populated”. Duality, like “double” consciousness, is not a numerical constraint, forcing a polarised binarism, but reflects a constitutive “heteroplicity” that outflows from duality. As a concept it is already reflected in Du Bois’ concept of “double consciousness”. This returns me to a general point made by Kalî Tal: “that

36. On this point, Deleuze and Guattari write: “Becoming is never imitating. . . . One imitates if one fails, only if one fails. . . . Imitation enters in only as an adjustment of the block, like a finishing touch, a wink, a signature” (2000: 305).

37. There is another thesis that could have been written. There will always be many such others. But the one unwritten here would have produced a “Deleuzo-Guattarian” Afrofuturism. I believe that such a project, while faithful to Deleuze and Guattari, would not have been so to Afrofuturism. Nonetheless, I would like to posit a double-fidelity: that writing through Afrofuturist concepts undertakes the kind of rhizomorphic assemblage that Deleuze and Guattari would have liked to have plundered themselves.

African American critical theory provides very sophisticated tools . . . since African American critics have been discussing the problem of multiple identities, fragmented personae, and liminality for over a hundred years” (1996).³⁸

The Space Race (and Other Technologies of the Self)

[Afrofuturist] artists were using blackness as a technology. It’s been used as a technology against us — being marked with a certain race determines your race, your movement, access, and privileges (Smith, in Womack 2013: 137).

Afrofuturist artist Cauleen Smith draws attention to how “[race] has been used as a technology against us”: the technology of “race” is a weapon: a bounding device that epidermalises the body, categorising it through phenotype, physiognomy, phrenology, genealogy, gender, sexuality, disability, genetics, culture or “ethnicity” as a (labouring) machine, servile and subhuman, designed to carry out various tasks, and thus accorded the (lack of) respect granted the unhuman. “Race” is a technology as it classifies others as but automatons, cogs in the machinery of capitalism and its plantation slavery and servile sweatshops. But implicit in this reading is that, if “race” is a technology, it can be deprogrammed against its oppressors, just as its androidal, cyborg, and machinic characteristics can be utilised to deconstruct, or tear down, the “master race”: not by striving “to become human”, but by abandoning it. The technology of “race” contains within itself the techniques of abandonment to become something other.

38. And as troubled by science fiction writer Samuel R. Delany in *Empire Star* [1966], wherein intergalactic “races” are categorised as multiplex, complex, or simplex, and in which “It takes a multiplex consciousness to perceive the multiplexity of another consciousness”, a perspective that the story’s characters — who evolve from simplex to multiplex in a retroactive timeline — describe as “uncanny” (1994: 65).

By reading race as a technology, I return to the invention of the word *robot* — by Czech writer Karl Čapek in his 1920 story *Rossum's Universal Robots (R.U.R.)* — that was crafted as a metaphor for “slave”. But more than a metaphor, I would like to suggest — as did the author, and science fiction since — that robots *are* slaves, purpose-built as such, to carry out servile tasks: just as what they metaphorise are already enslaved constructs — unhuman robots — built through the technology of race.³⁹

The phrase “technologies of the self” arrives from Foucault. Foucault develops it in 1982, where he defines his project as a “sketch[ing] out a history of the different ways . . . that humans develop knowledge about themselves” (1997: 224). Foucault analyses “these so-called sciences as very specific ‘truth games’ related to specific techniques that human beings use to understand themselves” (1997: 224). We can now see the Afrofuturist coordinates of MythScience, and of its techniques of becoming, analysed in an-other’s arena. I say “an-other’s”, because Foucault constructs this analysis within the providence of the *human*,⁴⁰ whereas Afrofuturism aids and abets unhumanity. Foucault continues, identifying four “technologies”. Analysing their differences and overlaps would take more space than I have here — though here I will mark one schism that will trouble the rest.⁴¹ The fourth technology is that of the “self”:

technologies of the self, which permit individuals to effect by their own means, or with the help of others, a certain number of operations on their own bodies and *souls*, thoughts, conduct, and way

39. For a reading of a contemporary android fighting for the freedom of the robotic underclass, see Cindi Mayweather in chapter two.

40. Even as Foucault does, of course, everywhere question the construction and production — a.k.a. “birth” — of “Man”. I will address some of Foucault’s thinking on biopolitics and “race” in respect to this question in chapter five.

41. The second and third categories of Foucault’s schema are also relevant: the “technologies of sign systems, which permit us [human selves] to use signs” and the “technologies of power, which determine the conduct of individuals and submit them to certain ends or domination, an objectivizing of the subject” (1997: 225). The latter technology suggests an inhuman power structure that can be thought as the Afrofuturist domination of the alien despot — this is how Eshun (over)reads Sun Ra, as identifying with “the Pharaohs, the despots, the ancient oppressors,” (1999: 09[154]). The former technology demands to be read through graffiti, in particular the sign systems of RAMM:ΣLL:ZΣΣ, where deconstructing the letter form and its typography partakes in the galactic signwar between (and beyond) good and evil — the “typewriter fighter/typefighter writer” (see RAMM:ELL:ZEE 2003).

of *being*, so as to *transform* themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality (my italics Foucault 1997: 225).

The fourth technology is humane: it concerns souls, being, and transformation. But it is implicitly posited against the first, unhumane technology, that of “production, which permit us [human selves] to produce, *transform*, or manipulate things” (my italics 1997: 225). Between the first and fourth technologies is a chiasmus occupied by the unhuman slave and the technology of race. Is an unhuman slave a thing or a self? Does its ambiguity not signify an undermining of the distinction between things and human selves? The slave, a thing, is produced and manipulated — by *us* humans. But connecting the technologies of “production” to the “self” is a single word: *transform*. Its placement in the first category of production suggests not just the manipulation of production by individuals, the “transformation of things”, but the transformation of things by things: their self-transformation. This reading is, of course, somewhat heretic:⁴² it is a reading not from the vantage of the human, but the *unhuman*, wherein transformation, by necessity of its force *as* transformation, signals something else: transformation means the ability to *become*, to become something other than what one *is*. A doubled self-transformation that would incorporate, like the fourth technology, “the help of *others*”: a transformation of the self not just through auto-affection — the myth of self-consciousness and auto-genesis that I analyse, after Derrida, as “white mythology” in chapter five — but through the “othering” of the self.⁴³ It is through the transformation of otherselves that the *worlding* is transformed apace, a worlding that, in Foucault’s schema, has already regulated the distinction between things and selves. Foucault’s implied worlding can be observed in the placement of “soul” in the fourth category of technologies, but not the first: the

42. Indeed, it is also the position of Derrida (and Stiegler (1998)) that I will explicate in chapter six.

43. This point is also in part Hegel’s, in respect to language, in *Phenomenology of Spirit*. But (see chapter five) our paths diverge from there.

regulation and policing of *soul* as the kernel of selfhood marks the metaphysics of which Foucault is elaborating.⁴⁴ But Afrofuturist transformations will not seek to elevate themselves from the first technology to the fourth, to seek out humanisation, to become that from which they have been excluded. To do so would leave the categories untroubled. Afrofuturism will not abide by the general metaphysical schema that places souls with selves, things with being-manipulated, or that separates things from selves to begin with. Afrofuturist transformations will abandon the chiasmus between the fourth and first categories, indeed, the entire quadruplex of categories, by intensifying a transformation that undertakes an exodus from the worlding of the schema as-such: an off-worlding that trembles in the undecidable distinction between the *who* and the *what*.

To return to the technology of “race”, that technology that divides the *thing–other* from the *self–human*, that white mythology of metaphysics that would designate Foucault’s first from fourth technologies: the schema in which the Afrofuturist contestation of the human takes place is a *technical* one, insofar as it is a “stage or an articulation in the history of life — of what I [Derrida, of course, here it is] have called *différance* — as the history of the *grammē*” (Derrida 1997: 84). To read Derrida on this point, and further address this problematic as a whole, I will turn to Bernard Stiegler in chapter six. What I wish to draw from Derrida at this point, however, is that the production of metaphysics is a *technical* endeavour. The trace of *différance* is inscribed in the unfolding history of *grammē*. And it is the general condition of *grammē*, *qua* technicity, in which that fourth technology — the *human* — is invented: produced, manipulated, and transformed. A short digression: wherever *différance* — as that

44. And of which Foucault is far from ignorant of: this minor deconstruction is not revealing, to any great extent, the “insidious metaphysics” of Foucault’s schema. Rather, it points out its *explicit* metaphysics, insofar as the four categories are precisely produced *as* “truth games”, *as* knowledges developed *about* the “self”. Inclusive to this meta-knowledge of the self, then, is the knowledge of the other, of that other-self that would be the “thing”, and all those others who would inhabit that “other” category, and yet still be included within the overall domain of “human (self)knowledge”: this would be another definition of *raciology*.

which “always already” destabilises the self–thing through differal-deferral, nonplacement, originary supplementarity, prosthetic genesis, and other catachreses I will explicate in chapter five — is suppressed or finessed, which is to say, absolutely everywhere anytime,⁴⁵ it is done so through *technical* means. The *trace of différance* is the history of the *grammē*, which is to say, argues Stiegler:

The history of the *grammē* is that of electronic files and reading machines as well — a history of technics — which is the invention of the human. As object as well as subject. The technical inventing the human, the human inventing the technical. Technics as inventive as well as invented. This hypothesis destroys the traditional thought of technics, from Plato to Heidegger and beyond (Stiegler 1998: 137).

We can now begin to resituate the question of “racial difference”. Afrofuturism, like Stiegler, is “considering a passage”, though not “a passage to what is called the human” (Stiegler 1998: 135), but exploring the many becomings that depart from it. In this “middle passage” or exodus of becoming, Stiegler’s question has already been posed: “And if we already were no longer humans?” (Stiegler 1998: 136). If humanity is that which is technological, the tool-operating hominid, it does so nonetheless by virtue of that which is “older than the specifically human written forms”, the possibility of the mark, the *grammē*, that would contest the opposition nature/culture as it would human/animal, self/thing. The possibility of exteriorisation that is the *grammē*, as Derrida notes in *Of Grammatology*, will have expanded with modern telecommunications and inscription technologies, as it “enlarges the différance and the possibility of putting in reserve” (1997: 84). It is not just fortuitous, then, that the above theses contend with the question of the *human race* as a technology, nor that the most critical site of its “effects” would take place in the very place where the category of the human was already the most

45. The “world” as such is lived as suppression of *différance*: it is that suppression (known as metaphysics) that constructs linear time, self-presence, and selfhood (see Derrida 1997: 166).

contested, already sociohistorically displaced from a *who* to the *what*, in which life had already been reduced to the point where its science fictional metaphor, the *robot*, draws upon it so as to allegorise the “human technology of the thing”: the so-called “subhumanity” of the slave.

It is in this context, of the technology of race, that I would like to reposition *concepttechnics*.

Concepttechnics calls for a thinking through of the technicity of the naturalised “human”.⁴⁶ *Concept* signals, in Foucault’s schema above, the technology of the self and its consciousness; *technics*, the technology of the thing. Both are technical. Concepttechnics demonstrates how the leveraging of the chiasmus between the two terms de-forms “race”.⁴⁷ Engaging with concepttechnics means thinking the constitutive admixture of technics/concept *on both sides of the divide* between the *who* and the *what*.

As I have been describing the concepttechnics of the “subject” above — unhuman or human — I would like to conclude this section by turning to the concepttechnics of the “object”. Concepttechnics also signals that technological objects perform conceptual operations — technical objects are designed, scripted, programmed, or encoded to engender certain use-behaviours that are in turn described, deconstructed, or exappropriated through creative misuse or *détournement* — while concepts are inhabited, shaped, and informed by technical objects.⁴⁸ Eshun explains the “conceptual technology” of concepttechnics by way of the turntable: “the decks have become a state of mind for the dj. After [dj

46. At stake here is the division encoded by Aristotle, in Book VI of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, as that between *physis* (that which has its principle (*archê*) in-itself) and *tekhne* (that which has its *archê* in an-other), that crumbling pragmatic difference between the natural and the artificial. Crucially, for Aristotle the origin (*archê*) of *tekhne* “is in the maker and not in the thing made” (1984: 1140a 1–20, p. 1800), and thus, contingent. *Tekhnēn tukhēn esterxe kai tukhēn tekhnēn* (Aristotle quotes Agathon: “Art loves chance, and chance loves art” (1984: 1140a 20, p. 1800)). The deconstruction that takes place through the history of the *grammē* questions the metaphysics of origin that Aristotle assigns to nature (*physis*): “these have their origin in themselves”.

47. The word cannot be torn apart without undertaking violence to its MythScience, a thinking that at once questions the Western separation, since Pythagoras, of *logos* to *mythos*; as Sun Ra scholar Sigrid Hauff remarks, “it is either one or the other — logic and myth exclude each other” (1994: 61).

48. The questions circulating around technical agency, technological determinism, and the de-programming of technical objects circulate in the *tension* of concepttechnics as a portmanteau strung across the chiasmus. For more positions that align these tensions, see Madeleine Akrich on de-scripting (1992); Derrida on exappropriation (2002); and Debord on *détournement* (1992).

Grandmaster] Flash, the turntable becomes a machine for building and melding mindstates from your record collection” (1999: 02 [14]).⁴⁹ But this is not all: the mind of the dj, which is to say the sonic unconscious of the turntablist — to riff on Lacan — would be “structured like a record collection”.

What I would like to emphasise here is how concepttechnics articulates technology to (the technology of) race: that Afrofuturism does not just perform work on the performativity of blackness,⁵⁰ but reads “blackness” as constituted by technicity, i.e., precisely by those technologies — digital, new, old, analog, mechanical, industrial, archival, or otherwise — that supposedly remain exterior to culture, performativity, the semiotic, the subject, etc. At its most unhuman, Afrofuturism swings toward the other side of the equation: “That you are from now on subject to gadgets and instruments of mechanical discourse processing” might have been rhymed by Dr Octagon as much as it has been writ by media theorist Friedrich Kittler (Kittler 1997: 84).

Science Fiction as a Toolbox

The advantage of Science Fiction (Sf) as a point of cultural departure is that it allows for a series of worst-case futures — of hells-on-Earth and being in them — which are woven into every kind of everyday present reality.

— Mark Sinker (1992)

Any sufficiently advanced technology becomes indistinguishable from magic.

49. Eshun’s choice of the record collection mixes well with Kittler, who notes that Freud conceived of “psychoanalytic data storage as functioning like the grooves which phonographs — instruments which, in contrast to Berliner’s later Gramophone, could both play back *and* record — etch onto wax or tinfoil rolls” (1997: 134). And, in mapping Lacan’s triad of imaginary, real, and symbolic to optical film, the phonograph, and computation, that “the medium of the real is to be found in analog storage devices is proven by every phonograph record. What is etched into its grooves can assume an infinite number of different numerical values but remains a function of a single real variable, time” (1997: 138). That temporality is epochally variable through the differential unfolding of materialized *différance* is pursued by Stiegler (1998).

50. As, for example, argued by Herman S. Gray, and which I will attend to in chapter one: that Afrofuturists are (merely) “*discursively* pushing the *conceptual* boundaries of blackness beyond the historic confinements of place, period, and identity” (my italics 2005: 153).

— Arthur C. Clarke (in Eshun 1999: 09[160])

Magic *is* a technique in the strictest sense of the word.

— Jacques Ellul (1964: 24)

Science fiction (sf) is a toolbox for Afrofuturism: it combines in two words the “science” of producing counter-realities. In its various forms, science fiction deploys the imagination to experiment with time and technology; it posits creative hypotheses and insights into other worlds; it ceaselessly writes through the desire to encounter “the other” through its aliens, cyborgs, artificial intelligences, and androids. Science fiction thinks beyond the confines of the planet, finding an endless fascination with the vast cosmos, the possibilities of alternate realities, worlds, and beings — and as Samuel R. Delany identified in 1978, sf has particular resonance for “race”: “We need images of tomorrow; and our people [African Americans] need them more than most” (2012: 14).⁵¹

Carl Freedman writes in his foreword to Samuel R. Delany’s *Stars In My Pocket Like Grains of Sand* that sf “is capable of nothing less than the general range of conceptual, structural, and stylistic experimentation that the modern novel as a whole has enjoyed” (Freedman 2004: xi–xii).⁵² Indeed, the “(post)modern novel” is difficult to disassociate from science fiction — taking into account Thomas

51. The study of the representation of “race” in science fiction, though of intersecting concern, is beyond the scope of this thesis. In this field, Adilifu Namu has written on “black racial formation” in sf cinema, arguing that there is “an unstated hegemonic affinity between the genre of sf film and the science fiction of race in America” (2008: 9). Isiah Lavender III turns to the “odd construction of race in a literature that has both reflected and constructed concepts of otherness informed and distorted by science”, though solely in an American context (2011: 19). There is also a wealth of *Star Trek* analyses (“The Wrath of Kant!”) that I cannot detail here, save to underscore Daniel Leonard Bernardi’s *Star Trek and History: Race-ing Toward a White Future* as a particularly scathing assessment of the Federation of Planets (1998) — and more germane to our interests (though more general), and mirroring the aim of Georg Lukács’ *The Historical Novel*, Carl Freedman argues that “science fiction” ought to be read as “a privileged and paradigmatic genre . . . for Marxism [and] for critical theory in general” (2000: xv).

52. Delany is an acclaimed Afrofuturist science fiction author of such works as *Babel-17* [1966], *The Einstein Intersection* [1967], *Nova* [1968], *Dhalgren* [1975], and *Trouble on Triton* [1976]. Delany is winner of two Hugo and four Nebula awards, and was inducted into the Science Fiction and Fantasy Hall of Fame in 2002. He is Professor of English and Creative Writing at Temple University. Delany writes on gender, race, and sexuality, often reflecting on his own identity as a bisexual person of colour, as well as writing extensively on theoretical approaches to and within literature and science fiction. His work is, in a word, indispensable.

Pynchon, Toni Morrison, David Foster Wallace, Haruki Murakami, and Marcel Proust, just to name a few twentieth-century authors who speculate upon time, technology, and alterity — just as science fiction is difficult to disassociate in general from a multiplicity of media.⁵³ Samuel R. Delany reminds us that science fiction signals a broader mode of speculative thought: as we read, or engage the work, “we build up a world in specific dialogue, in a specific tension, with our present concepts of the real” (2012: 69). In Afrofuturism, however, the building up of an *offworlding* takes place not just inside the work, to which the “real” is articulated as its outside, but in the production of a counter-reality “within” the “real” that contests the latter’s boundary. My point here is that Afrofuturism deploys science fiction to achieve offworlding. Science fiction, when thought as a *concept* and not just as an idiom, as beyond the metagenre in which the minor world of “literature” takes place, and thought as a concept/technics, names the strategy for *worlding* in-itself.⁵⁴

What is the “science” of Afrofuturist science fiction, in the technical production of tomorrows? Such productions, as I have suggested, are becomings that outflow the boundaries of representation. “Science” is an art, a technics, of “intensification, more sensation”, writes Eshun. In music, “science is rhythm intensified, rhythm estranged” (1999: A[187]). Sonic rhythm accelerates becomings through its *affects*. Afrofuturist “science” conjoins the technical production of becoming to the chronopolitics of myth.

53. This general statement aside, I remain attentive to Delany’s distinction between the two “discourses” of science fiction and literature, of “two different sets of values, two different ways of response, two different ways of making texts make sense, two different ways of reading” (2012: 68). The difference is struck in the interpretation of language, for which Delany gives two phrases: “*Then her world exploded*” and “*He turned on his left side*”. In science fiction, the two phrases take on the meaning of planetary destruction and the activation of a cyborg’s sinistral flank, respectively. In literature, says Delany, the two mean a “emotionally muzzy metaphor” and “some kind of masculine, insomniac tossings”, respectively (2012: 68). Yet in the “modern novel” and the broader sf context in which Afrofuturism circulates, I would argue that *both* sets of meanings are at play. It is in their tension — between metaphor and an alien or technological literality — that one can situate sf as a broader speculative mode of “worlding”. That our world is becoming science fictional through available cyborg communications technologies troubles Delany’s distinction, a point granted by William Gibson, who since *Pattern Recognition* (2003) has begun situating his narratives within the vanishing present.

54. A position that I draw from Sha LaBare: “Sf is a worlding practice which in principle excludes nothing” (2010: 126). It also excludes nothing because nothing would be exterior to it: it is the metaconceit of the production of “worlds”. I will turn to LaBare below.

Thus it counters the “tradition”, writes Eshun, where “20th C science sterilizes myth” — or rather, gives the *appearance* of doing so as “white mythology” (see chapter five) — by conceiving how the impossible, the fantastical, or the mythical, often conceived of as *magic*, “is just another name for a future, an as-yet unknown medium” (1999: 09[160]). Afrofuturist emcees such as the RZA, RAMM:ΣLL:ZΣΣ, Rakim, and KRS-One *drop science*: “to drop science is to mystify . . . In [Afrofuturist] HipHop, science breaks it down in order to complexify, not clarify . . . science is the end of edutainment and the systematic mythification of everyday life” (Eshun 1999: 03[029]). The deployment of “science fiction” in Afrofuturism is a technique for producing MythScience. Effective MythScience is trial-and-error, an experimental methodology to see what sticks — and thus capable of countering the fiction known as “consensual reality”.⁵⁵

Delany names the stakes of his Afrofuturology as follows: “Without an image of tomorrow, one is trapped by blind history, economics, and politics beyond our control” (2012: 14). For Delany, the “our” signifies the racialised collection of bodies implied in his “our people”. I will suggest that Afrofuturism does more than produce “images of tomorrow” so that “we will have . . . control over the way we may actually get there” (Delany 2012: 14). Afrofuturism exceeds the boundaries of idiomatic science fiction and cybernetic futurisms: it produces “living myths” in the technical production of becomings. Such productions are not *images*, but take place through bodies conjoined to networks of belonging.

55. While Afrofuturism bears similarities to the 20th century avant-garde counter-tradition of experimental art, of pushing past boundaries once they are identified, Afrofuturism contends the very boundary between art and science, or rather art and the production of counter-realities. Benjamin Piekut, writing of New York’s avant-garde in 1964, touches upon Sun Ra and the Arkestra, noting, however, the distinction that Ra draws between his concerns with “Space” and “Intergalactic things” and those of jazz musicians Archie Shepp and Cecil Taylor, who were concerned with the “Avant Garde and the New Thing” (2011: 114). Ra, in his “intergalactic way” was pointing out precisely this difference — a difference that Delany also marks in a different manner, between “the science fictional world and the real world”, differences that “constitut[e] the tales’ science-fictional aspect” (2012: 8), a difference transformed by Afrofuturism just as it is by Delany when he calls for “images of tomorrow” for “our people” (2012: 14): Ra already *was* a “living myth”: he was always *becoming* what “art” represents.

Thus “Science fiction” is better served by an abbreviation — “sf” — that embraces *science* and *speculative fiction*, but also *science fantasy*, *structural fabulation*, *sonic futurism*, and *surfiction*. As Sha LaBare writes in his *Farfetchings*, “this abbreviation [sf] has worlds” (2010: 5). All of these terms depict means of imagining alternate (off)worldings, with differing emphases upon technology, speculation, myth, fantasy, or music as the vehicle of doing so.⁵⁶

Afrofuturism propels sf into an activity, a MythScience: it becomes a means to reconstruct the world, to take it apart, to transform it, and thus, to “world” it otherwise. In *Farfetchings*, LaBare argues for sf as a “mode”, a process of “worlding, thinking at strange scales, imagining vast temporal and spatial frames, and telling tales of first contact” (2010: 5). LaBare specifically posits Afrofuturism as an *sf mode* — a way of reintrepreting and transforming the world that restages the temporal and subjective frames of worlding.⁵⁷ However, Afrofuturism, I suggest, *is one of the precursors and conditions of sf in general*. It is that Africans were abducted to begin with that alien abduction recurs as a science fictional motif. It is that unhumans are forced into conditions of mechanical servitude that science fiction retroactively metaphorises the robot. It is that unhumans have explored means of temporal alteration and becoming that time travel has become its science fictional physics. And it is that insurrections, uprisings, and MythSciences have derailed whitewashed futures that AlterDestinies shape science fiction’s multiple

56. While *science* fiction tends toward hypothetical deployments of futurist technologies, *speculative* fiction deals with alternate realities or timelines minus the technology fetishism, such as in Octavia Butler’s *Parable of the Sower* (1993). *Science fantasy* tends toward the rewriting of heroic myths in science fictional settings, with less attention to technology — think the space opera narrative of *Star Wars*. *Sonic* fiction is Kodwo Eshun’s term for the speculative mode of writing produced when encountering Afrofuturist electronic music in its affectual and conceptual complexity, including liner notes, track titles, and music journalism (1999). LaBare describes “structural fabulation” as the term Robert Scholes invents “to salvage sf for structuralist criticism”; while “surfiction”, as developed by Raymond Federman, emphasizes “metafictional, fabulist, and experimental ways of writing” (see LaBare 2010: 4).

57. Though on the whole LaBare’s turn to sf as a “mode” parallels my own approach to Afrofuturism, his work focuses on constructing a theory of “ethical worlding” drawn from the labours and media of “sf agents”. LaBare argues for writing through the “sf mode”, which he describes as “an emerging thread of thinking that takes sf for a mode available to all forms of practice, production, and interpretation”, defining the “sf mode” as “a ‘way of experiencing’, an experimental way of life, a structure of feeling or, indeed, as that reality *affect* the sf tradition calls ‘sense of wonder’” (2010: 4–5).

universes. This latter point is picked up by LaBare when he writes,

Rather than draw on what Zoë Sofia has called the “collapsed future tense” (1984) — a tense that posits the inevitability of certain kinds of technological change, favored by singularitarians, technophiliacs, governmental and corporate hype — the sf mode as I see it suggests, instead, that futures, pasts, and presents are always realms of open possibility in which technocultural transformations create, in the here and now, what Sun Ra likes to call “alterdestinies” (LaBare 2010: 5, fn. 4).

Other-Worlding: Chapters

Chapter 1, **Rewind the Records**, outlines the invention of “Afrofuturism” as a concept and a descriptor, producing an inventory of the sociological and conceptual approaches proliferated in the nascent arena of Afrofuturist scholarship and addressing their detractors. I end with the question of the posthuman, addressing an ongoing debate as to the affiliation of Afrofuturism with posthumanist thought, and the impact posthumanism has had upon black embodiment and the representation of blackness.

Chapter 2, **Vessels of Transfer: Allegories of Afrofuturism in Jeff Mills and Janelle Monáe**, turns to the question of representing blackness in Afrofuturism: is it the case that cosmic messengers and androids merely allegorise blackness? Or in what ways do becomings exceed representation? To think through these questions, I address the cyclicity of sedimented time and the production and contestation of modern slave subjectivity in the performances and music of Afropop android Cindi Mayweather, a.k.a. Janelle Monáe, and Detroit techno turntablist and producer Jeff Mills.

Chapter 3, **In Advance of the Landing**, undertakes a meditation upon Afrofuturist temporality and subjectivity, commencing with an exegesis of Mark Sinker’s seminal text on Afrofuturism, “Loving the Alien”. It turns to *Armageddon been in effect*, Public Enemy’s phrase to describe the post-apocalyptic temporality of post-slavery existence, and various Afrofuturist figures of transformational becoming in elaborating the effects of *Alien Nation*.

Chapter 4, **We Have Never Been Human**, addresses “dehumanisation”: the abandonment, or exodus from, the human. How is slavery transformed by the Afrofuturist chronopolitics of *Armageddon been in effect* and *Alien Nation*? How do Afrofuturist becomings chart other paths through dehumanisation? Addressing these questions will require differentiating strategic responses to slavery, and teasing apart the concepts and approaches of Afrofuturism from Afrocentrism.

Chapter 5, **God-breathing Machines: The White Mythologies of Consciousness**, turns to the production of the “white mythology” of “consciousness”. Reading Chow, Fanon, Derrida, and Foucault, it seeks to position the question of “race” at the heart of consciousness, metaphysics, and biopolitics. In positing the abandonment of the human, it explores MythSciences of exodus in Malcolm X and in the RZA, Abbot of the Wu-Tang Clan, a.k.a. Bobby Digital.

Chapter 6, **Calling Planet Earth**, enters into a sustained engagement with the poetic and philosophical texts of Sun Ra, bringing them to bear upon Bernard Stiegler and Jacques Derrida’s “invention of the human”, before turning to an encounter between Ra and Martin Heidegger over the question of *das unheimlich*. This chapter will also introduce various techniques to reading Ra’s poetry — or rather, occult-symbolist texts of supreme alphanumeric coda — as an Afrofuturist theoretical text.

Chapter 7, **Inconclusive: Cosmopolitanism**, reflects upon the positioning of Afrofuturism to Paul

Gilroy's concept of "planetary humanism" and to discourses of the posthuman, suggesting that Afrofuturism, in its abandonment of the human construct, is compatible with neither position — and that to deny its exhumanist impulse is to erase the future already underway in the Afrofuturist project.

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Chapter 01

Rewind the Records:

Afrofuturism In & Out of the Academy

The History Of Afro Futurism and Black Science Fiction automatically begs the question: “Well, what isn’t futuristic about being Black in America?” The entire history of Black America can be seen as a fundamentally futurological and science fictional enterprise, a perpetual biding on hope and struggling for change endeavor that frequently employs far flung visions of tomorrow and other more oblique speculative stratagems in pursuit of outcomes barely foreseeable in the near-present.

— Greg Tate, course description, “The History of Afro Futurism and Black Science Fiction”¹

Where does my fascination with space come from? From wanting to escape from here.

— Mad Mike Banks, *Underground Resistance* (1994)

Dark Matters of the Afrofuturist Unthought

Wherever one observes the question “What is Afrofuturism?” there yields the astrophysical effects of dark matter, as if its invisible forces deflect exploratory inquiry: where its imaginative unearthing might yield its secrets, there shimmers in space only the uncanny effects of its cosmic gravity. *Dark matter*, as a metaphor for both black identity and black sf, holds double meaning in Afrofuturist scholarship; for it signals not only a neglected corner of what appears to be literary, cultural, or media study, but an elusive entity that is all too often tamed and defined by the instruments of disciplines bound to

1. Offered Spring 2013 in the Department of Africana Studies, Brown University: <<https://courses.brown.edu/courses/spring-2013/afri-1050r-s01>> (accessed 01 September 2013).

ethnonationalist apparatuses and confining approaches, leaving the language, concepts, and force of Afrofuturism unthought.

In her introduction to *Dark Matter: A Century of Speculative Fiction From the African Diaspora* (2000), Sheree R. Thomas explains the metaphoric effects of the title as “a nonluminous form of matter which has not been directly observed but whose existence has been deduced by its gravitational effects” (2000: x). Thomas argues that “African diasporic speculative fiction”, though more or less invisible to the “mainstream literary canon”, nonetheless shapes its concerns by the gravity of its absence (Thomas 2000: xi)². Thomas suggests that there is much more to black sf, a whole other constellation of “less well known black writers” (Thomas 2000: xi). The gravitational effects of absence also pervade Afrofuturist scholarship: everywhere Afrofuturism is uttered, yet there remains an (albeit, alluring) absence of inquiry into its conceptual dark matter — its historical, philosophical, and esoteric inheritances, sociopolitical linkages, conceptual operations, ontogenetic transformations, and performative forces.

Though there has been some two and a half decades of Afrofuturist scholarship — taking as its starting point in the late 1980s the exploratory music journalism of Mark Sinker in *WIRE* magazine (1992), the cultural criticism of Greg Tate in *The Village Voice* (1992), establishing its namesake with Dery’s 1993 interviews with Samuel R. Delany, Tricia Rose, and Tate (1994a), and undergoing an inventory of its “Sonic Fictions” in Kodwo Eshun’s *More Brilliant Than The Sun* (1999) — the conceptual elaboration of the field remains somewhat nebulous.³

2. While I share Thomas’ concern that “Like dark matter, the contributions of black writers to the sf genre have not been directly observed or explored” (2000: xi), Afrofuturism often remains constricted to its literary production. Dery (1994a), for example, themeatises the question “why aren’t there more black science fiction writers?”. Sha LaBare reflects: “Of course — and by his own admission — by focusing on ‘sf’ writing and sf as a genre, Dery conjures a conundrum where none need exist” (2014).

3. Nebulous: like the *nebulae* from which a star is born. This introduction is near canonical, though Sinker’s work — which eclipses all but Eshun in its compact prescience, conceptual rigour, and hyperlinkage of personages — is oft left out of the escapade: “the emergence of Afrofuturist studies in the 1990s, when cultural critics including Mark Dery, Greg Tate, Tricia Rose, and Kodwo Eshun first drew attention to the centrality of science fiction themes and techniques in the work of many black authors, artists, and musicians” (Yaszek 2006: 41).

In 1998, Alondra Nelson, then a graduate student, founded with Paul D. Miller (a.k.a. DJ Spooky) the *Afrofuturism.net* listserv and website, whose mandate called for an exploration of “futurist themes in black cultural production and the ways in which technological innovation is changing the face of black art and culture”. As Lisa Yaszek notes, it is Nelson (2002) who “has been instrumental in developing Afrofuturism as a coherent mode of critical inquiry” (2006: 42), particularly with the publication of the Afrofuturism issue of *Social Text* in 2002. Since its publication, the first decade of the 21st century has seen scholars analysing an array of Afrofuturist aesthetic forms.⁴ Ytasha Womack, Afrofuturist scholar and author of the *Rayla 2212* series of science fiction novels, proffers what is probably the most comprehensive definition of Afrofuturist *aesthetic* production. Womack writes that Afrofuturism is “an intersection of imagination, technology, the future, and liberation”, in which “Afrofuturists redefine culture and notions of blackness for today and the future” by combining “elements of science fiction, historical fiction, speculative fiction, fantasy, Afrocentricity, and magic realism with non-Western beliefs” (2013: 9). Nabeel Zuberi, exploring how Afrofuturism has produced the conceptual tools to interpret its own aesthetic production — what I argue are its MythSciences, chronopolitics and concepttechnics — writes that Afrofuturism “codifies, organises and maps an alternative cultural history and critical framework for African-American media production” (2004: 79). Somewhat strangely, Zuberi maintains an Americocentric boundary for Afrofuturism — a recurring point I will address below.⁵

4. Research in Afrofuturism has been undertaken in far-flung places. “Afrofuturism” appears in Szwed’s detailed and lively history of Sun Ra (1998); Kilgore’s genealogy of the space race in American popular culture, *Astrofuturism* (2003); Weheliye’s critique of posthumanism and postsoul in *Phonographies* (2005); Williams’ essay on black secret technology and Detroit techno (2001); and Gray’s survey of black popular culture and political representation (2005) — to scout just a few sites. In few places outside of Eshun (1999) has the philosophical import of Afrofuturism been analysed in relation to questions of technology, becoming, rhythm, and temporality. A few of the more recent forays include Pope’s article on Detroit techno (2011); Rollefson’s work on Afrofuturism and anti-anti-essentialism (2008); Yaszek’s readings of Afrofuturist science fiction (2005; 2006), and Nabeel Zuberi’s essays on Sun Ra and sf film music (2004).

5. Odd only because Zuberi’s work is some of the most comprehensive, inventive, and astute otherwise.

Yet, despite these and other isolated approaches, the study of Afrofuturism is hampered by confusion over *who* or *what* is an “Afrofuturist”, to *where*, *what*, or *when* the concept “Afrofuturism” ought to be applied, and above all, what the concept signifies beyond a sociohistorical descriptor that reflects the general statement of black science fictional media production. At the core of Afrofuturism’s unthought is a tension concerning the role of *blackness* to Afrofuturism. Michael Bennett, in one of few pieces critical of what he sees as the “vague” deployment of Afrofuturism, writes that “the very term Afrofuturism is riddled with only barely addressed question marks” (2006: 251).



In this chapter, I will dive into existing scholarship on Afrofuturism, excavating its definitions and positioning within various fields. At the same time, I seek to emphasise the epistemic difficulty of confining Afrofuturism to any one discipline, method, or movement. Perhaps this is because of its mutability, lack of cohesion, or, as Bennette contends, “vagueness” — yet, I would suggest, a vagueness in the sense of “*anexact yet rigorous*”, a vagueness of the vagabond, to sample Deleuze and Guattari (2000: 367). The dark matter of the Afrofuturist unthought certainly takes on the character of the vagabond: it trespasses across borders into unauthorized domains, creatively thieves from the archives, and like all good anti-authoritarians, remains sceptical of conservative attempts to categorise its becomings under a census of approved identities or confine its MythSciences to regulated modes of production.

Undocumented Afromonauts

Let us begin with an unauthorised MythScience of Afrofuturism. For the duration of the listserv's existence, the question of what is, or ought to be, Afrofuturism remained a perpetual topic of discussion (see Rollefson 2008).⁶ In 2002, four years after the listserv's founding, Mark Rockey Moore posted a text that speculated upon whether "Afrofuturism" as a proper name is something of an "oxymoron" (2002). Reading Afrofuturism as an "antithesis to futurism" — to unidirectional or secure futurisms that would erase the archival and ancient knowledges of the "multi-hued Afronaut"⁷ — Rockey Moore described his vision of an Afro-futurism:

a vision of fluffy, puffy afros crowning multi-hued afronauts — juxtaposed atop a sterile, ivory vision of technological progression — is born; space ships and colonization, galactic empires and trans-planetary corporations. Further speculation inevitably conjures up nightmares of oppression at an almost unimaginable scale as the vagaries of the human soul are pit against the relentless drive of technology (Rockey Moore 2002).

Rockey Moore's definition is intriguing for three aspects. The first is its dystopian inflection. If anything, it critiques idealist approaches that would equate Afrofuturism with technological progress, just as it critiques futurisms that would obviate the empires of colonialism and techno-capitalism. The second is its incorporation of Afrofuturism as a counter-futurism *within* a whitewashed dystopian future. This dystopian future remains presciently eerie precisely because it allegorises, and emphasises, the uneven topias of the present. For Rockey Moore, Afrofuturism is a counter-futurism — or what Sun Ra called an "AlterDestiny" — to "sterile, ivory visions" of the future precisely because it is constitutive

6. And of which I was a later participant. As far as I can tell, the listserv ceased to function in the late '00s, with the website, *Afrofuturism.net*, falling into a state of disrepair that it remains in to this day. While the web community around Afrofuturism has dissipated — in a manner echoing other downfalls of listserv culture (such as the once bustling *Nettime.org*), as the invention of corporatised "social media" began to encamp online activity into digital silos of datamining — the production of "Afrofuturist" art, exhibitions, publications, and conferences, has only increased in tempo and size.

7. To which I recall the motto of the now public and acknowledged NSA: "Defending Our Nation. Securing The future."

to them: it exhabits them.⁸ The third is that just as futurology cannot ignore galactic empires and trans-planetary corporations, neither can it erase the afonaut. But the “multi-hued afonaut” is not confined to the dark matter of the *hue*-man “race”. Nor has its epidermal signifiers been reduced to the default whiteness that encodes the supposed neutrality of sterile and ivory futurisms. The multi-hued afonaut glitters in the undecidability of skins.

For Rockeymoore, Afrofuturism refuses its categorisation as a “mechanical, technology driven vision of the future”, embracing a holistic, “one-world philosophy” that offers “a sane alternative leading to a sustainable future”. Rockeymoore writes that its “way of thinking holistically” follows from the knowledge of ancient Africanist Egypt (Kemet), in which the “triumvirate of philosophy, science and spirit” makes up the “kemetian tree of life cosmogology”. Unlike futurisms that would disconnect from the past, Afrofuturism revisions the past into an alternate future. Rockeymoore summarises this theme — one found throughout Afrofuturist chronopolitics that retrieve ancient Kemet for futurist productions — as an emancipatory counter-tradition evolving in cosymbiosis to “western civilization”:

There is a tradition of black emancipatory thought, inextricably linked to western civilization and its evolution, that has proffered various works of a speculative nature pertaining to the physical or spiritual omnipresence of the Afrikan archetype within a western framework (Rockeymoore 2002).

For Rockeymoore, the Afrikan archetype functions as the repressed of Western civilisation, its accumulated ancient temporality eternally returning to rewrite the West’s erasure of Afro-futurisms. While Rockeymoore’s inscription of Afrofuturism remains critical of the relentless drive of

8. *Exhabits*: it “inhabits” them as its other future. Where inhabitation would signal synthesis or introjection, exhabitation or incorporation would signal constitutive otherness assimilated at the origin without sublation (*Aufhebung*). This reading is developed by Derrida in “Fors” (1986a).

technological progress, he nonetheless hints at an-other form of technology that arise from the Kemetian triumvirate of philosophy, science, and spirit. This other “technology” — a technology that exceeds “race” in the figure of the “multi-hued afonaut” — signifies Rockeymoore’s dream of a hybrid and transformative Afrofuturism whose coordinates are not constrained by progress technologies, ethnonationalism, undirectional futurologies, or epidermal embodiments.

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Scholarly definitions of Afrofuturism have remained a little more constrained. In the 2002 issue of *Social Text* dedicated to Afrofuturism, Alondra Nelson writes that “Afrofuturism can be broadly defined as ‘African American voices’ with ‘other stories to tell about culture, technology and things to come’” (Nelson 2002: 9). Though in the same essay Nelson expands the coordinates of Afrofuturist subjectivity from African-American to Afrodiasporic, the stock citation of the phrase disseminated a perception of Afrofuturism as consisting solely of Americanised black sf authors. Nelson’s influential definition drew its coordinates from Dery (1994a), the latter who first inscribed the meaning of “Afrofuturism” within the boundaries of the African *American* experience:⁹

Speculative fiction that treats African-American themes and addresses African-American concerns in the context of twentieth-century technoculture — and more generally, African-American signification that appropriates images of technology and a prosthetically-enhanced future — might, for want of a better term, be called “Afrofuturism” (Dery 1994a: 180).

9. A definition that Dery defends in Twitter correspondence with this author to this day, even when it is pointed out how, in his interview with Samuel R. Delany, he draws attention to the “orbital Rastafarians” in William Gibson’s *Neuromancer* (1994a: 194) — a fictive representation of not only *offworld* Afrofuturists, but one would assume, of spacebound *Jamaicans* encircling Babylon (nevermind the fact of Gibson’s residence in Vancouver, Canada). The influence of Americocentrism persists. The Americanisation of Afrofuturism is likewise found in Rollefson; while recognising the Afrodiasporic coordinates constitutive of Afrofuturism in his reading of Gilroy’s concept of the black Atlantic, Rollefson nonetheless opens his essay by reiterating Dery’s definition of Afrofuturism as “a uniquely African-American take on futuristic narratives of scientific and technological progress” (recapitulating Dery, in Rollefson 2008: 83).

The Americocentrism of this definition deserves pause. The “themes” that Dery and other scholars attribute to African-Americans — erasures of the past, the trauma of slavery, structural racism, etc., that are transformed by way of an inventive futurology in literature and other “signification” — are not *particular* to African-Americans. Centuries of black Atlantic colonialism and slavery in the Caribbean, the imperial distribution of systems of slavery and indentured labour across the Americas (including Canada, but also notably Brazil), and the diasporic movements of migrants from the peripheries of empire to its centres, demands that Afrofuturology is recognized as a planetary discourse that has transformed apace with globalisation. In the 21st century, Afrofuturism encompasses Earth itself. Confining its production, dissemination, and “culture” to ethnonationalist boundaries ignores a multiplicity of Afrofuturisms from outside the United States, including the centres of old Empire (such as the United Kingdom)¹⁰ and, most significantly, the continent of Africa itself, with its 54 nation states (two disputed) and hundreds of differentiated affiliations.¹¹ But Americocentrism also ignores the transnationalism constitutive of the “African American”, not just through the Middle Passage but through “encounters of peoples of African descent with each other” that structure belonging well beyond or before the nation-state: a “black internationalism” formalised in the Pan-African Congress

10. Home to British-Ghanian theorist Kodwo Eshun and the Afrofuturist film work of the Otolith Group, and an epicentre of Afrofuturist electronic music for decades — acid house, jungle and drum ‘n’ bass, dubstep and grime, to briefly name a few electronic genres that traverse through the United Kingdom (see Reynolds 1999) — as well as of the dub/punk rock nexus that gave birth to ska and the antiracist solidarities expressed by The Clash and dub poet Linton Kwesi Johnson (see Gilroy 1993).

11. An assessment of Afrofuturist works from the African continent is, unfortunately, beyond the scope of this thesis. It is also sorely needed. Ytasha Womack has touched upon a few ways in which Africanist mythologies and cultures (such as the Dogon) have been repurposed for Afrofuturist MythSciences (2013). I will later mention Dagara shaman Malidoma Somé (see Somé 1994). I have begun to trace a few Afrofuturist sonic components through Afrobeat and into Shangaan Electro; see (van Veen 2013a). For studies of cosmopolitan Africanist musical forms, see (Chernoff 1979) and (Feld 2012). To paraphrase Achille Mbembe, we are faced with the “extraordinary poverty of . . . literature on Africa, and with crisis of its languages, procedures, and reasonings” (2001: 5). Not because of a dearth of research, but because of its ethnonationalist overcodings. Appiah echoes such concerns, analysing the European importation of race and the “myth of an African world” (1992). Hountondji attacks the Western-made myth that there is a homogeneous and indigenous “African philosophy” (1983). On the contrary, Ikuenobe argues that there is a dominant philosophical framework of communalism in African belief systems (2006). Asante (and other Afrocentrists) combine such views into an *African Intellectual Heritage* — though drawn from diasporic sources (1996). Traversing this debate, Thompson explores the diasporic connectivity of black Atlantic to Africanist cultural practices (1984). The diversity of these positions suggest intriguing vectors for Africanist Afrofuturisms.

and the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) of Marcus Garvey, and deformed through the jazz cosmopolitanism of the Harlem Renaissance (as one example of many cosmopolitan music cultures) (Hayes 2003: 5). The United States is not a nation-state member of a diaspora, it is a diaspora: it is constitutively criss-crossed by diasporic belongings. As Brent Edward Hayes reminds us, W.E.B. Du Bois' "problem of the colour line" was not just addressed to the United States, but to "the nations of the world" (2003: 2). Confining Afrofuturism to an ethnonationalist cultural analysis also shortcircuits the *political* recognition of planetary structural racism and its institutionalisation in borders, zones, checkpoints, visas, permits, passports, and immigration controls, just as it denies the counter-nationalist diasporic networks of belonging that everywhere Afrofuturism, in its MythSciences, seeks to proliferate, produce, and explore.

Black to the Future: Help Wanted, Apply Within

Why do so few African Americans write science fiction, a genre whose close encounters with the Other — the stranger in a strange land — would seem uniquely suited to the concerns of the African-American novelist? (Dery 1994a: 179–80)

The signifier of "Afrofuturism" began with a question: why aren't there more black science fiction writers?¹² Dery writes that the absence of black sf writers

12. A question that I here resample from Sha LaBare, who begins his "Slaveship Earth" by returning to the same moment in Dery's text (2014). It is also a question that Dery infers from Delany. Writing in 1978, Delany addresses the question: "Is there a sizeable bunch of stories that might be considered specifically 'black' science fiction?" (2012: 13). To which Delany replies: "To date, no. There isn't". Dery refers to this query in his later interview (1994a: 190). In "Racism and Science Fiction" (2000), however, Delany will inventory a list of black proto-science fiction in the work of M.P. Shiel, Martin Delany, Sutton E. Griggs, Edward Johnson, and George Schuyler (a history that Yaszek later develops (2005)). Delany also intriguingly suggests that many sf pulp writers, who wrote by pen names and corresponded by mail, could have been "blacks, Hispanics, women, Native Americans, Asians, or whatever. Writing is like that" (2000: 384). This possibility is fictionalised *within* science fiction in a stunning episode of *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine* ("Far Beyond the Stars", season 6, ep. 13), in which Captain Benjamin Sisko wakes up to find himself a 1950s-era science fiction writer named Benny Russell; the episode is

is especially perplexing in light of the fact that African Americans, in a very real sense, are the descendants of alien abductees; they inhabit a sci-fi nightmare in which unseen but no less impassable force fields of intolerance frustrate their movements; official histories undo what has been done; and technology is too often brought to bear on black bodies (branding, forced sterilization, the Tuskegee experiment, and tasers come readily to mind) (Dery 1994a: 180).

Before Dery outlines the many arts and avenues of Afrofuturism, he begins his inquiry by questioning the predominance of whiteness in a literary genre he sees as uniquely suited for black narratives. The “suitability” of science fiction literature for “African Americans” deserves a closer reading. The “sublegitimate status of science fiction as a pulp genre in Western literature”, writes Dery, “mirrors the subaltern position to which blacks have been relegated throughout American history” (1994a: 180).¹³ Even as the themes of science fiction appear opportune for imaginative fictionalisations and translations of black experience, this opportunism proceeds upon the assumption that populations marginalised in American history seek marginal forms of representation in Western literature. The question also vexes Samuel R. Delany — who though he sees “more dark faces” at sci-fi conventions in the early 1990s, wonders “where the new black writers are hiding out” (Dery 1994a: 187–88). But behind a question emphasising the representation of African-Americans within what is but one form of representation is another assumption: the political expediency of *mirroring* a marginalised subalternity

poignant for its depiction of racism: prohibited from publishing, Sisko goes insane, scrawling the story of DS9 on his asylum walls (a test of his reality parameters by the Bajoran wormhole Prophets, no less: for the supreme reality is, as always, undecidable). See: <[http://en.memory-alpha.org/wiki/Far_Beyond_the_Stars_\(episode\)](http://en.memory-alpha.org/wiki/Far_Beyond_the_Stars_(episode))> (accessed 03 December 2012).

13. Dery’s “subaltern” is (in Spivak’s words) “a *strategic* use of positivist essentialism in a scrupulously visible political interest” (1996: 214). It does not correspond to Spivak’s strict account of the subaltern as without “identity” or “positive historical content”, with no relation to the “popular” or the “nation-state”: viz., the subaltern *cannot* speak, allegorise or “mirror” subalternity (see Spivak 1996: 211–16). The structure of my critique here mirrors Spivak. My turn to (racialised) allegory in chapter two infers that the constitutive polarisation of the “subaltern” (nonidentity *or* “representation”, erasure *or* presence of “positivist essentialism”) is struck through with unhuman *becoming* that unEarths the “strategic essentialism” of “race”. Whether this eludes the “constitutive paradox” of “the critical force of anti-humanism” in which “the essentializing moment, the object . . . is irreducible” is also constitutively undecidable (Spivak 1996: 214). See also “Gayatri Spivak: The Trajectory of the Subaltern in My Work” (Youtube, 2008).

to a marginalised form of representation. The figure of the mirror that Dery invokes suggests a perfect image in which the African-American “subaltern” — in itself, strictly, a nonrepresentable non-identity (see Spivak 1996) — would find itself reflected in the very form of its production. Besides the “strategic essentialism” undertaken in the allegorisation of subaltern blackness, the African-American image has also been assigned to an appropriate mode of production in which the “subaltern” would *recognise* itself. The supposed neutrality of the mirror binds the racialised subaltern to the appropriate mode of production. Science fiction is identified as the *suitable* or *proper* uni-form of aesthetic labour in which a racialised subaltern *represents* subalternity.

I would like to impact upon these questions by turning to Malcolm X, in a mode of interruption:

Back when I was growing up, the “successful” Lansing Negroes were such as waiters and bootblacks. To be a janitor at some downtown store was to be highly respected. . . . (X 1999: 5–6).

Or, in the middle-class “Negroes” of Boston:

I’d guess that eight out of ten of the Hill Negroes of Roxbury, despite the impressive-sounding job titles they affected, actually worked as menials and servants. “He’s in banking”, or “He’s in securities”. It sounded as though they were discussing a Rockefeller or a Mellon — and not some grey-headed, dignity-posturing janitor, or bond-house messenger (X 1999: 43).

Under structural racism, the uniformity of subaltern employment is suitable. Where there is no identity, there are suitable uniforms (of identity). The subaltern speaks of meniality as meaning more when the position is uniformly so. Malcolm X addresses how such values are interiorised by those suited for the occasion. It is a question of the “suit”: of finding a naturalised fit in the racialised social order,

and uni-forming for the occasion. The Afropop android Janelle Monáe, a.k.a. Cindi Mayweather, wears a tuxedo and other such suits as a self-described “uniform”. Her suits reference the “uniformity” of the android — what we might call its “suitability” — as well as paying homage to the class uniforms (and racialised uniformities of class) Malcolm X describes above:

When I started my musical career I was a maid, I used to clean houses. My parents — my mother was a proud janitor, my step-father who raised me like his very own worked at the post office and my father was a trash man. They all wore uniforms. And that’s why I stand here today in my black and white and I wear my uniform to honor them (in Jorge 2012).

And recently, in lyrics on *The Electric Lady* (2013), where “we in tuxedo groove”, Janelle Monáe on “Ghetto Woman”:

And living with a mom and my grandma who used to feed me
We would move around in the city place to place
The landlord come for the rent face to face
Her eyes too heavy from working nights as a janitor
She’d keep it to herself and nobody could understand her
Even when she thought that she couldn’t she carried on
She couldn’t imagine both of her daughters here all alone
Before the tuxedos and black and white every day
Used to watch my momma get down on her knees and pray
She’s the reason that I’m even writing this song
Ghetto Woman no it won’t be long. Now sing along
— Janelle Monáe, “Ghetto Woman”, *The Electric Lady* (2013)

The question of “suitability” can be traced along a signifying chain that, in its slippages, reflects the racialised “mirror” of reflecting content to uni-form: a chain that binds suitability to the suit, the

uniform to the performance of uni-formity. But to break this chain: none of this questioning, here, is to imply that science fiction *is* sublegitimate or that African-Americans are *unsuitable* to write science fiction.¹⁴ Dery is quick to point out that both “blacks” and “science fiction” have been “relegated” their position “throughout American history”. The process of *relegation* is chained above. But its chaining does not defer a questioning of the question that would assign uniform employment to the racialised subaltern because of an unthought naturalised suitability.

I would like to, again, impact this section with an Afrofuturist sampling. The problematic can be restated under the following terms: it is one of a preprogrammed destination: of the suitable destiny for a body uniformly racialised. I would like to turn to Sun Ra, who emphasises the enunciation of a “destination unknown” when “you’re on the spaceship Earth” (2005b: 443). Elsewhere Ra names destination unknown the AlterDestiny. Sun Ra has his own uniforms: the space clothing of the alien Pharaohs. Such destinations unknown, suggests Ra, are made through the “elasticity of words” that craft the “natural self”:

The multi-self of words
Is energy for thought - If it is a reality.
The idea that words
Can form themselves into the impossible
Then the way to the impossible
Is through the words
(Ra 2005b: 431)

With elastic and impossible words, Ra enunciates his alien cogito: “my natural self is not of this

14. Or to do whatever he or she wants: which is the point, simple, yet structurally negated, in Dery’s questioning.

world” (2005b: 467). Naturality is denatured. The chain of signifiers is important for Ra: words craft the self and its destination on spaceship Earth. Sun Ra is an ancient alien deity. Ra displaces his “naturality” and his “destination” by announcing, in the 1974 film *Space Is the Place*: “I am the Alter-Destiny” — declaring that *destiny* is one such human category detoured by the impossible enunciations of his living myth. I draw Ra into this equation to suggest that if sf is to be articulated with Afrofuturism, it needs to take into account the AlterDestiny of the latter, in which sf literature is but one piece of a cosmological puzzling. Science fiction is not the destiny of Afrofuturism.

Samuel R. Delany’s novels already undertake such AlterDestinies. Take the hazy and hallucinogenic cityscape of *Dhalgren* (1980). In the fragmented psychogeography of what appears to be a post-apocalyptic metropolis, its multi-hued inhabitants are near alien, or uncannily offhuman in their behaviour, thought, and technology. As we encounter the fractured fantasies of the real through the shifting perceptions of a hallucinating (or possibly schizophrenic) narrator, The Kid — and the city itself ruins itself: there is no master reality lurking beneath, only this architectural kaleidoscope — the reader is increasingly forced to identify with the narrator’s disseminated I and its population brain. Kid’s myselfs rewind memories through a heteroglossia of signs. Reading the text renders *you* alien to yourselves.

To address Dery’s hypothesis, then, in which science fiction is suitable because it allows for a reflexive revisioning and themeatisation of its uniformity (Mon  e) or a disrobing of its naturalised suitability by populating the uniform subaltern into the many (Delany). But it is also suitable, just as it is unsuitable, because Afrofuturism envisions Afrodiasporic subjects as abducted aliens to begin with: to reverse all the preceding premises, science fiction is the *effect* of Alien Nation.¹⁵ This effect is inscribed *within* sf as a

suitable identity for the subaltern: the robot. Sf is *too* suitable — and so must be suited-up or otherwise — because it has *already* inscribed a *suitable place* for black sf in its robotic metaphor of the slave: it is this uniform suitability (precisely because the robot is not a metaphor, but the entry point of a referent) that Afrofuturism seeks to transform otherwise.

There are, of course, very pragmatic reasons for the absence of black writers in science fiction, as Delany points out: the genre of science fiction, from the 1950s to 1970s, was nearly an exclusively white and male domain by virtue of its oft-patriarchal and white-futurist narratives,¹⁶ as well as the exclusivity that such stories projected by virtue of their relationship to technology: “Boys Club! Girls, keep out. Blacks and Hispanics and the poor in general, go away!” (Delany in Dery 1994a: 188). But if this is the case, why is writing *about* technology seen as a deterrent to black participation, while the opposite appears to be the case in black music, performance, or other such arts, where the creative mis-use of technologies has flourished? The above reflections offer some coordinates to address such a question.

The Mirrored Memories of an Afrofuturist

I would like to turn to a second moment in the development of the Afrofuturist *subject* of scholarship. There remains confusion as to whether an Afrofuturist scholar *is an Afrofuturist*. The identity of the scholar has been uncritically conflated with the text that *concerns* the objects, events, music, texts, and mythical personages of Afrofuturism. The collapse of the text to the author extends to

15. I will turn to this concept in more detail in chapter three. It signifies the dual valence of Afrofuturist belonging: alienation within and towards an alien nation-state (to which one has been abducted by aliens); and belonging to an Alien Nation *of* the abducted (the offworld diaspora).

16. Though among white authors there are notable exceptions, notably Philip K. Dick, Ursula K. LeGuin and (surprisingly, perhaps) Robert Heinlein (among others).

the field as a whole, where “Afrofuturist scholarship” is conflated *with Afrofuturism*. Let me take one particular example. Alondra Nelson, in her introduction to the 2002 issue of *Social Text*, positions Afrofuturism as a discourse to counter the rhetoric of the “digital divide”. Speaking of the “popular mythology” of the “late-1990s digital boom”, Nelson recapitulates how assessments proliferated of

the myriad inequities that were exacerbated by the information economy — most notably, the digital divide, a phrase that has long been used to describe gaps in technological access that fall along lines of race, gender, region, and ability but has mostly become a code word for the tech inequities that exist between blacks and whites. Forecasts of a utopian (to some) race-free future and pronouncements of the dystopian digital divide are the predominant discourses of blackness and technology in the public sphere. What matters is less a choice between these two narratives . . . and more what they have in common, namely: the assumption that race is a liability in the twenty-first century — is either negligible or evidence of negligence. In these politics of the future, supposedly novel paradigms for understanding technology smack of old racial ideologies. . . . Blackness gets constructed as always oppositional to technologically driven chronicles of progress (Nelson 2002: 1).

Nelson offers a perceptive assessment of the racialisation of technological access that obscures economic inequalities (2002: 6). It is to this discourse of the digital divide, however, that Nelson *positions* Afrofuturism, and its “paradigm for an African diasporic technoculture” that neither bends to the “neocritical narratives” that turn to the future by severing themselves from the past, or the “racialised digital divide narrative” that strives to become the “[frame] of reference for understanding race in the digital age” (2002: 6, 8). Afrofuturist *scholarship*, then, turns to “new directions in the study of African diaspora culture that are grounded in the histories of black communities, rather than seeking to sever all connections to them” (Nelson 2002: 9). While I retain significant questions concerning the *grounding*

of Afrofuturism — a question I will redress in different ways in chapter six — Nelson’s point is that Afrofuturism reflects a history of Afrodiasporic technological engagements (including all of its musical traditions from hip-hop to electronic music) and perspectives upon futurology where, following Kalí Tal (1996), “African diasporic history contains a wealth of theoretical paradigms that turn the reified binary between blackness and technology on its head” (2002: 6).

It is at this point that one encounters the following misperception *of what Afrofuturism is*. Michael Bennett writes that Afrofuturism was “inspired by the dearth of politically and culturally attractive alternatives to the digital divide concept” (2006: 250). This is to confuse Afrofuturism — a concept applied retroactively to describe at least a century’s worth of Afrodiasporic MythScience — with the political and theoretical positioning of its scholarship (by Nelson) in a particular context. It should be noted that Bennett echoes the very racialised discourse of the digital divide that Nelson critiques. Bennett calls for “technoeconocentrism”, in which the study of “technoscience must be of immediate and central concern to Black Americans because of the economic significance of technical innovation and novel scientific knowledge” (2006: 246).¹⁷ A similar misconception is found in Rollefson, who writes that “the very premise of Afrofuturism relies on the normalized disparity between blackness and the cybernetic technological future — a binary that is reflected in the racially coded phrase ‘digital divide’” (2008: 85).

Both of these statements conflate the study of Afrofuturism to its object. They also appear to neglect

17. While Nelson too points out the underlying economic disparities that the rhetoric of the digital divide ignores, she does not inscribe technology as essential to “progress”; for Nelson, Afrofuturism serves to imagine broader realms in which “technology” can be inscribed. It also undermines the narrow analytic framework of technoeconocentrism. The debate between Nelson and Bennett reflects an older one: that between Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Du Bois, between a valorisation of technoeconomic pragmatism (i.e., uniform and suitable skills-training and class underemployment for subalterns) and the need to address structural racism and proliferate Afrodiasporic economic practices at no less a multiplicity than any other peopling.

the definition of Afrofuturism produced by Dery some nine years prior, as well as earlier essays by Mark Sinker (1992) and Greg Tate (1992). Further, technoeconocentrism ignores Herman S. Gray's history of media and aesthetic production in which "black people . . . have been at the forefront of using new technologies" (2005: 150). Nelson's positioning of Afrofuturist scholarship as contra the digital divide has been adopted by Gray, who contrasts Afrofuturism to Anthony Walton's theses of black "technological illiteracy" (2005: 157). However — and this is a point I will turn to in more detail below — Gray argues that "the transformative and imaginative work being done [by Afrofuturism is] on the concept of blackness, rather than on the new digital technologies per se" (2005: 167). Gray means to suggest that the role of Afrodiasporic subjects in the invention and production of technologies remains limited. As Nelson notes, such a statement ignores the underlying economic inequalities generative of the digital divide, as it avoids the structural racism that impacts hiring in technology sectors and elsewhere. It also neglects the creative mis-use of technologies in globally disseminated Afrodiasporic arts and musical cultures, a performativity that likewise works upon the concept of blackness by transforming its perception in popular culture from the technologically illiterate to the technologically inventive. In short, Afrofuturism addresses the question of working "on" technologies by shortcircuiting the polarisation of the cultural to the material. Gray's critique follows that of Bennett, who writes that the "practical basis of this strategy [Afrofuturism] is semiotic, turning on appropriation of images and other depictions of Black futures, and on re-articulations of the meaning of such signs" (2006: 250). Of course such a statement cannot account for the global empire known as hip-hop, in which technology, music, and production are entwined within a *gestalt* that sees no need to separate art from economics, "race" from technology.

To return to Nelson's definition above: there is also a second problematic identified in Nelson's association of Afrofuturism with "black community", in which the identity and body of the author is conflated to the attributes of an aesthetic object.¹⁸ It is here that one encounters the problematic of blackness, or rather, of the ways in which Afrofuturism allegorises blackness just as it transforms it.

I would like to suggest that rewiring the thoughtware of Afrofuturism requires the conceptual autonomy and the singularity of its object, *even while* addressing strategic associations of production to *Afrofuturist* agencies, *even as* the strategies of becoming otherwise than human — the alien becoming of Afrofuturist becomings — troubles such groundings in epidermalised bodies. There is, of course, no pressing need to police who or what constitutes an Afrofuturist other than to recognise that not all works *interpreted* as Afrofuturist are *produced* by Afrofuturists: in short, there is a difference between Afrofuturist scholars and scholars of Afrofuturism, just as there is a critical and crucial difference between the alien becoming of Sun Ra and the earthly identity of sf writer Samuel R. Delany, even though both, arguably, are "Afrofuturists".

Attention to these differences is all the more necessary when considering the most radical, innovative, and challenging aspects of Afrofuturism, in particular the transformative ontogenesis, *through blackness*, of becoming otherwise than human. What *blackness* can mean — as well as what epidermalisation in general can come to signify otherwise — *propels* the exodus from the human undertaken by Afrofuturist becoming. Such becoming otherwise, in some shape or form of an alien, cyborg, androidal, animal or machinic exodus from the human, expands the concept and production of

18. Given that long before Foucault's homicide of the author the first rule of formalist literary analysis was "never assume the author is the narrator", the *prima facie* assumption that an "Afrofuturist" text reflects a like authorial identity bears critical reflection. Yet the question is, perhaps, a political one, one of strategic essentialism, as Weheliye notes, where there is "irony in the dissolution, and perhaps even abandonment, of the subject as a category of critical thinking just as minorities are being recognized as subjects within academic discourse" (2005: 47).

blackness, unhinging it from epidermalisation, just as it abandons the “treacherous category” of the human (Eshun 1999: 00[-005]).

There are three questions I wish to introduce here that I will use to guide the critical reading of Afrofuturist scholarship, as well as provide trajectories for the following chapters:

(1) *Metaphors and MythScience*. Is Afrofuturism read as but a metaphoric operation, and thus as a secondary semiotic operation of simulacra to “concrete” struggles located elsewhere? Or is the metaphoric read otherwise, as a MythScience, an operation of counter-reality formation and becoming?

(2) *Allegories of Blackness and Becoming*. Is Afrofuturism read as solely a performance or allegory of black identity? As Alexander Weheliye asks, why is the minoritarian “automatically linked to the category of identity rather than the subject” (2005: 47)?¹⁹ Or, are the allegories of Afrofuturism examined for their omniversal proliferation of alien becomings? If so, is blackness returned to a categorical assertion of epidermalised identity, or is it extended towards a transformative alterity?

(3) *Reflexivity*. Do the conceptual forces of Afrofuturism — “far from a purely fiction-driven enterprise” but a “material critique”, argues Rollefson (2008: 85) — unearth or exform the terms of the analysis itself? Is Afrofuturism read not just as an object — yet more dark matter, put in its place — but as a conceptual operation capable of changing the parameters of the inquiry itself, as a “theoretical discourse” or “philosophy”?

19. Even as Gray argues that Afrofuturists “discursively [push] the conceptual boundaries of blackness beyond the historic confinements of place, period, and identity”, this remains but a “discursive” operation of technico-identity in which “new information and digital technologies” are used to “change the terms — expand, really — of imagining and constructing twenty-first-century narratives of black Atlantic identities and representation” (2005: 153). The intergalactic thought of Afrofuturism is here contained by the parameters of a history, a century, a digital technics, and a secondary discursivity of representation and identity (“Afrofuturists bring together, discursively anyway, notions of blackness . . .”).

Afro— (Blackness Unbound)

As an international aesthetic movement concerned with the relations of science, technology, and race, Afrofuturism appropriates the narrative techniques of science fiction to put a black face on the future. In doing so, it combats those whitewashed visions of tomorrow generated by a global “futures industry” that equates blackness with the failure of progress and technological catastrophe (Yaszek 2005: 297).

Sheree R. Thomas’ short story collection, *Dark Matter*, was pivotal in establishing a broader appreciation of Afrofuturist speculative, fabulist, and science fiction. It anthologised contemporary writers — Nalo Hopkinson, Ishmael Reed, Anthony Joseph, Ama Patterson, Paul D. Miller — alongside earlier 20th century texts from Charles W. Chesnutt to George S. Schuyler and W.E.B. du Bois.²⁰ The volume explores a matrix of Afrofuturist tropes: alternate timelines infused with explorations of race-changing and space-faring technologies, including black cyborgs, space traders, stim-sex suits, and colour-changing skin techniques; the utopic/dystopic impact of astral events that bring about the apocalypse of racialised societies, but also the frightening future ghettos of “african cultural containment units”; and as Anthony Joseph titles the excerpt from his novel of the same, “The African Origins of UFOs” — in which one can imagine all matters of encounter with figures of the otherworldly black alien.

In the tales of *Dark Matter*, the critical, yet transformative, moment of Afrofuturist sf is that “blackness” — as an identity or marker mapped to pigmented bodies — is everywhere “stretched and

20. As mentioned, Lisa Yaszek details the history of 19th century Afrofuturist science fiction, though concluding with Samuel R. Delany that “authors associated with these magazines generally did not write stories that addressed racial issues in meaningful ways” (2006: 44); (Delany 2000: 384). Darryl A. Smith, however, perceptively argues that the work of Du Bois, Bell, and Baraka can be read as the paleonym of ~~fiction~~, “a pedagogical tool for the perceptual recalibration of the real. As it does so, however, it ironically disavows itself as fiction even as it retains that label” (2007: 205). Such an “affirmative disavowal” appears characteristic of Afrofuturism: that fictions disavow their imposed status as but simulacra, precisely because the “real” — nonfiction — is but the master fiction.

pulled beyond the boundaries of our current conceptions”, as Gray writes, by “Afrofuturists” that are “discursively pushing the conceptual boundaries of blackness beyond the historic confinements of place, period, and identity” (2005: 154, 153).²¹ Yet what are the effects of this “stretched” concept of blackness?

The question as to whether “Afro”-futurism is essentially tied to black bodies, or whether its imaginary force achieves an escape velocity from defining identity/subjectivity through “racial” markers is a paradox that strikes through Afrofuturism and its scholarship. At the very least, its strategic essentialism is assumed. For example, Ytasha Womack emphasises the importance of black representation in science fiction, in which the “obvious absence of people of color in the fictitious future/past”, and the dearth of blackness in mainstream science fiction film, television and literature provoked the imagination of “countless black kids who yearned to see themselves in warp-speed spaceships” (2013: 6). In her discussion of Afrofuturist scholarship, Womack places emphasis on what Nelson called “black community”, in which scholars are defined as undertaking “the study of works that analyze dynamics of race and culture specific to the experiences of black people through sci-fi and fantasy works” (2013: 23).

On the other channel, as Womack emphasizes, and following her similar meditations in *Post Black* (2010), Afrofuturists not only *redefine* contemporary as well as past/future “notions of blackness”, but articulate how race is “a creation too” (2013: 9, 27).²² This approach would seem to suggest, then, that scholars should not just look for representations of blackness, “specific to the experiences of black

21. Though Gray ascribes the agency of this boundary work to “Afrofuturists”, it is important, again, to recognise the autonomous labour performed by the text or otherwise media object in pushing the limits of blackness.

22. Womack approvingly quotes artist and filmmaker Cauleen Smith, whom I cite above: “blackness is a technology. It’s not real. It’s a thing” (2013: 27).

people”, but to ways in which blackness has been constructed as a particular “technology” that Afrofuturism *unEarths* through its alien, android, and other post-human becomings. At the limit is Kodwo Eshun’s approach that attempts to reject “all notions of a compulsory black condition” in the rendering unrecognisable of “blackness” (1999: 00[-004, -001]).

The strategic question is whether the second approach — the transformation of blackness beyond its epidermalisation — is confined or downplayed to a subaltern role of semiotic play in the political drama or whether it is taken as a starting point for becoming something otherwise: an entirely *other* strategy that need not neglect the first. Evidently we are trading in metaphors. Herman S. Gray approaches Afrofuturism through its “metaphors from the works of black science-fiction writers”, those Afrofuturists who “claim that blacks scattered across the Atlantic world are aliens in an alien land, ever on the lookout for clues and resources that point the way out of alien nations and conditions of bondage” (2005: 166). For Gray, this focus on a “performance of blackness” opens Afrofuturism to a “troubling” critique:

After all the talk about data, thieves, and aliens, is it the case that, in the end, Afrofuturists are offering nothing more than a sophisticated model of consumer sovereignty, clearing the way for their particular version of software and product content — in this case cultural identity as opposed to the services and brand identity of some other corporate entity? (2005: 166–67)

The question is a curious one: it assumes an outside. It also assumes Afrofuturism seeks an outside in the positing of a pure exteriority of resistance to capitalism. Gray’s argument also works against technoeconocentrism — which is nothing but the explicit production of black technologies and brands. In chapter five, I will demonstrate that figures such as hip-hop emcee and Wu-Tang Clan Abbott the

RZA inhabit a hybrid space of Afrofuturist becoming and branding from the start. But granted the strictly metaphoric operations of Afrofuturism for Gray, what other cultural weapons *could* it wield? To this end, Gray draws the conclusion that (and I resample the phrase) “[the Afrofuturist] focus is on blackness and identity rather than on the new technologies and their capabilities” (2005: 165, 167).²³ Afrofuturism works on the performance of black identity, but not the *prima materia* of concrete technologies. Yet, and in part anticipating the fallout of erasing all possible alternatives, Gray writes,

these cultural moves are significant. They push farther, harder, and more imaginatively for thinking about the relationship between new information technologies and black cultural practices than corporate marketing strategies that continue to call for greater minority access to the new digital technologies (Gray 2005: 167).

Gray highlights one of the critical operations of Afrofuturism, insofar as it challenges the racialised narrative of the digital divide. Of course, one assumes that Gray’s point, like Nelson’s, is that the Enlightenment tale of a supposedly neutral narrative of technological “progress” should likewise be catapulted into an Afrofuturist questioning: there are historical reasons for the “black suspicion of technologies (owing to a history of terror aimed at blacks and exercised through various technologies of transportation, surveillance, discipline, and punishment)” that should give pause to any representation of technology as “largely neutral and beyond politics and identity” (Gray 2005: 155). This is all the more complicated where blackness is utilised to advertise “black box” technologies. In *Color Monitors*, Martin Kevorkian argues that corporate marketing links black bodies to technological black boxes through “juxtaposition or outright identification”, thereby *naturalising* blackness as “the natural

23. Besides the false problem of this supposed opposition, why all the emphasis on *digital* technologies? Given that Gray recognises Sun Ra as an Afrofuturist (“His compositions and performances were distinguished by the futuristic and extraterrestrial sounds of electronic instruments” (2005: 148)), how is this digitisation applicable to even Gray’s accounting of Afrofuturism?

machine” (2006: 75). Blackness is recoded as the subservient technology under the new cybernetic empire, just as it was naturalised as slave labour (under empires still in effect). The nonfictional metaphor that links the thematic naturalisation of technological subservience to enslaved subjugation remains the *robot*. Such representations of blackness, argues Kevorkian, reveals the “side-by-side opposition between executive white masculinity and technologized blackness” (2006: 75). As Ben Williams outlines in his remarkable study of the cyborg, machinic, and aquatic becomings of Afrofuturist Detroit techno producers, the “mechanical metaphors” that signify whitewashed posthumanity, or what Kevorkian calls the “natural machine” of blackness, began with slavery:

Two historical currents mingle to produce a return of the repressed: the history of African Americans as experimental subjects of technological research and the history of slavery, whose structures were justified by the portrayal of African Americans as subhuman, unworthy of the rights and responsibilities accorded fully vested subjects of the Enlightenment (Williams 2001: 170).

Kevorkian, Gray, and Williams all demonstrate various ways of conducting critical deneutralisations of technologies. Yet the question I wish to address here is why Afrofuturist efficacy is perceived as being constrained, as in the case of Gray, to working solely on the performance of blackness, and not upon the “technologies themselves”. Besides ignoring the creative mis-use of technologies such as the turntable, performativity, as a political strategy and descriptor of agency, is bound to the side of the concept, culture, and the subject, and halted from working on the side of the object and technics. Gray’s assumption of a schema that separates the object/thing from the concept/subject is thought otherwise in Afrofuturist concepttechnics. The isolationism of Gray’s “cultural move” neglects that Afrofuturism’s chronopolitics, its technics of becoming — its concepttechnics — traverses precisely this distinction

between the *who* and the *what*, just as it destabilises the supposed barrier between blackness and technology that would maintain the former's subservience as "the natural machine".²⁴

Black Secret Technologies

The Afrofuturist performativity of "black secret technology" demonstrates not just a cultural move, but a cultural *matter* — not just as an imaginary futurism of ideal or dystopic technologies but a technics recovered from a neglected past: the legacy and inventive histories of "black secret technologies". Throughout the Afrofuturist imaginary one encounters otherworldly dreams of advanced black technologies recollected from past eras, taking as their direct or indirect inspiration the "ancient pyramidal technologies" of black ancient Egypt (see Kreiss 2008). I will first detail their popular representation, before turning to contemporary practices.

"Black secret technologies" encompass the ways in which ancient technologies are retrieved from the past to form new MythSciences, such as Sun Ra's Kemetian technics that make-up the architecture and design of his musically-powered space ship in the film *Space Is the Place* (1974). In popular science fiction, Afrofuturist black secret technologies appear throughout the 1994 film and television series *Stargate* (1997–2007). *Stargate's* MythScience conjoins the "ancient alien astronaut" speculative theories of the New Age — that ancient aliens constructed (or aided in the construction of) the world's ancient cities and monuments, including the pyramids²⁵ — with what can only be described as an

24. And in ways that challenge the subservient technics that Kevorkian outlines in *Color Monitors*. In his last chapter, Kevorkian suggests "creative alternatives to the racializing tendencies of cyberphobic culture", all but naming Afrofuturism as he discusses DJ Spooky, Ishmael Reed, Octavia Butler, Colson Whitehead, Ralph Ellison, Parliament/Funkadelic, and Thomas Pynchon (see Kevorkian 2006: 140–62).

25. Many such theories also explain the movement of massive stones by way of vibration-sound — a point that appears to have been picked up by Sun Ra for his musical spaceship and for his "tuning" of the Earth (2005b) (also see The History's Channel's "Ancient Aliens" series <<http://www.history.ca/ancientaliens>>). There are intriguing Afrofuturist strains of New Age MythSciences. Authors such as Robert Temple in *The Sirius Mystery* (1998) have popularised theories of "ancient alien astronaut" contact to explain West African Dogon

outerspace Afrofuturism. Various characters from the Pharaoh Apophis to the warrior class, the Jaffa, are peopled with black humanoids. Blackness is on both sides of the Biblical Exodus and Freedom Struggle that the series allegorises: blackness reigns among the alien Pharaohs, yet it is also emblematic in the popular resistance to them. Of importance in this MythScience is the Afrofuturist freedom struggle of Teal'c, former First Prime to Apophis, who becomes a rebel leader of the "Free Jaffa".

In *Stargate*, several MythSciences collide: the ancient pyramids are landing sites, but not for friendly aliens from Sirius or Orion's Belt (i.e., the Annunaki), but for a parasitic alien "race", the snake-like Go'auld. The Go'auld motherships, known as Ha'tak, are pyramidal structures, with the top section of the much larger pyramid detaching for planetary landings. The Go'auld, who require human bodies as hosts, rule the galaxy; the series narrates the eight-season struggle that Earth and other (more or less friendly) alien planets undertake to defeat the Go'auld (as well as other foes, including lego-like robotic Replicators). Black secret technologies abound in *Stargate*: stone-and-crystal based ancient energy sources, hieroglyphic control panels, monolithic ancient weapons....²⁶

The phrase "black secret technologies" thus signifies Afrofuturism's chronopolitics of technological

rituals connected to the Sirius star system, drawing from the curious research undertaken by anthropologists Marcel Griaule and Germaine Dieterlen in *The Pale Fox* (1986). Laird Scranton has furthered such speculation in *The Science of the Dogon* (2006), whose title signifies the symbolic destabilising of "science" in this discourse. In other realms, Peter Kingsley takes standard narratives of technological development (such as the inventions of the spear and stirrup) and transforms them into metaphysical accounts of suppressed knowledge in *A Story Waiting to Pierce You* (2011) and proffers a lengthy and mystical re-reading of the ancient Greeks in a manner mirroring Kemetian historical revisioning in *Reality* (2010). As speculative, poorly researched or dogmatic as these works are, their MythSciences offer refreshing ways of unEarthing the mind (and that at times mirror Deleuzian-Guattarian theorising around the impact of a technical object, such as the stirrup, which also appears throughout *A Thousand Plateaus*).

26. Which is not to say the series is absent from racialised stereotyping, heroic patriarchs, and an Americocentric whitewashing of its SG-1 team. But, in the manner of the best sf, the show is wonderfully self-reflexive of its Hollywood constraints, often voicing its own concerns with sexism, patriarchy, racism, nationalism (and Hollywood): like *Star Trek: Voyager*, it creates an in-show show that parodies itself (see season 10, episode 200). The character of Colonel Samantha Carter, though conspicuously blond and white, and though playing into FemGeek stereotypes, memorably asks: "Do you think I'm stupid because I'm a human, a woman, or both?" (see season 10, the Quest Part Two). Upon receiving the response she expects ("both") she punches to the ground (and not slaps) her evil interlocutor, the Go'auld Ba'al. Of course, it does take a *white* woman to stage the question of feminism. The next episode features a strong black female village leader who marshals resistance to the galaxy-invading religious-army allegory, the Ori. I could go on, but will only note that the series is spectacularly filmed in Vancouver with a cast drawn from Canadian character actors, many who made their mark on The X-Files.

artifacts, as it recovers Afrocentric ancient technologies and transforms them into a strategic MythScience for the unfolding present. Such strategies could be contained as a “cultural move”. But the phrase also signifies the ways in which *contemporary* technological objects are repurposed to perform in ways unintended, undertaken through the “de-scripting” of objects such as the turntable, which is transformed from a playback device to an instrument and musical archive sampler (see Shapiro 2002; Mudede 2004; Fikentscher 2003). Here we encounter “cultural matter”.

The turntable — or rather the repurposing of the Technics SL1200MkII turntable once manufactured by Panasonic (see Goldberg 2004) — provides a case example of a black secret technology.²⁷ Designed for playback — and not for performative or physical manipulation — its use with elliptical DJ needles (so as not to damage the vinyl record) to loop, scratch, and re-phrase sections of vinyl records constitutes a creative mis-use of its passive playback design. Several technical factors, none of which were *designed* for turntablism by Panasonic, resulted in the creative mis-use of the Technics by “deejays” to invent the art of turntablism: a magnetic direct-drive (and not belt drive) motor, thereby allowing the DJ to manipulate the platter; an adjustable and near-instantaneous start-and-stop button for the platter itself; a stabilized tone arm with adjustable needle weight; and a pitch control of plus or minus 8% with a quartz lock for the 33 and 45RPM standards (also see Goldberg 2004: 110).

A single turntable, however, does not produce the instrumentality of turntablism or DJing in general: at least two are required, connected by a mixer. Club mixers of the 1970s, lacking cross-faders

27. Shapiro notes that it was John Cage who first pointed out the performative aspects of the device in “The Future of Music: Credo” (1937) (2002: 164; Cage 1973), though Goldberg (2004) traces some mis-uses of its playback to the late 19th century. In both cases, it wasn’t until dub, disco, house, techno and hip-hop that the turntable (in Heidegger’s parlance) “came into its own”, if only for its *resilience*: “the Technics 1200Mk2 has withstood the full weight of an individual executing a break-dance move known as a hand spin on its platter” (Goldberg 2004: 110).

and many haptic refinements for performativity,²⁸ were likewise mis-used for increasingly stylistic engagements with the assemblage of two-turntables-and-a-mixer.²⁹ These creative mis-uses then fed-back into the design of mixers, as production companies began incorporating crossfaders, transform switches, per-channel line EQs and other such “features” required by turntablists.

But even this setup would prove ineffective without the production of oil-based vinyl records (of higher durability than shellac) that are 12” in diameter (offering a larger control surface). It is the vinyl archive itself that is the musical condition of the turntablist assemblage. Turntablism and DJing would not be feasible without an archive of recorded music, in a format affordable to physical manipulation. By recombining selections from the archives of recorded sound, new styles of rhythm and genre are invented — hip-hop, but also the sampladelia and mixing styles of electro, house, techno, jungle, and electronic music in general. As David Goldberg writes, the DJ “has redefined the relationship between recording and playback technologies and how people use them as a means of manipulating and practicing culture. In the hands of a [DJ], the turntable became a compositional tool, and record collections became archives . . . bringing direct physical interactivity to what is essentially a storage medium” (2004: 111).³⁰

Last (but not least) is the soundsystem itself, an apparatus honed in Jamaica, where dub and reggae records, dropped by *selectahs*, were sonically crafted specifically for large-scale, bass-heavy rigs (see Veal

28. In particular, such mixers had too many channels and lacked per-channel EQ; the haptic design is cluttered, leaving little space for the speedy movements required by fast fingers. In the 21st century, mixers incorporate digital technologies to integrate Digital Vinyl Systems (DVS) such as Serato and Traktor Scratch, as well as onboard, per channel FX, oscillators, and “sweepable” EQs, among other technical refinements for sound sourcing and outputting.

29. Contrary to Beck, the third term is *not* “a microphone”. Beck infamously forgets the mixer on “Where It’s At” (1996).

30. Kai Fickentscher also writes of how “the club deejay as a force transforming the relationship between music as defined by performance and music conceptualized as authoritative text” (2003: 290). Unfortunately he dates the Panasonic-made Technics SL1200 to the mid-1980s: its production began in 1972, and ended in 2010. The ceasing of production (due to increasing costs for some of the components, but also a decline in turntablism as purpose-built digital technologies change the parameters of “DJing”; see (van Veen and Attias 2011, 2012)) is a tale for another time.

2007). In Jamaican dub and reggae, writes Michael Veal, “the studios and sound systems have continuously fed back into each other”, comprising “the major arenas for stylistic innovation” (2007: 46). This innovation includes the proliferation of versions and remixes produced as sonic weapons for “soundclashes” between rival soundsystems. The repurposing of the turntable, writes Tim Lawrence, “transformed this marginal practice into a DJing art, spontaneously remixing each record according to its own accents while simultaneously reading the mood of the dance floor” (2003: 108).

The translocal components that make up the black secret technology of turntablism and the figure of the DJ — whose is the *effect* of this assemblage — exceeds all ethnonationalist containment. Constitutive to the turntablist assemblage — but also produced by it — is the call-and-response patterning of the black Atlantic, where versions and remixes proliferate in an explosion of styles through transcultural sampling. Distribution networks for records made elsewhere, the supply lines of production, and the touring circuits of DJ performance are crucial relays of transcultural belonging focused around the dissemination of “turntablism” as a practice and performance. The concept of sampling takes on a broader meaning in this Afrodiasporic context: it signifies the activity of creative mis-use at the level of content, a concepttechnics that takes place before the mass production of the digital recording tool known as the “sampler”. The iconic E-mu SP-1200, released in 1987, automated the mixological task of looping, recombining, and selecting previously undertaken by the “live” performance of turntablists.³¹ But sampling itself, as a practice, is also transcultural: the Jamaican soundsystem assemblage is imported to New York by DJ Kool Herc in the mid-1970s, where its

31. The SP-1200 is not the first sampler. But it is the first effective *digital* sampler. Its available memory led to the intensification of sampladelia in Public Enemy’s Bomb Squad productions. Prior to the SP-1200, hip-hop primarily relied upon drum machines. The limited-memory synthesizer-based samplers available — whose commercial release dates back to 1976 (Harry Mendell’s Computer Music Melodian) — were utilised for hooks and vocal snippets. For more on sampling, piracy, and creative theft see *Sound Unbound* (Miller 2008).

soundclashes are *resampled* in hip-hop's block-party performances (see Chang 2005).

The creative mis-use of the turntable catalyses, then — not as a prosthesis but as coterminous to its emergence — the very production of “Afrodiasporic futurism, of a ‘webbed network’ of computerhythms, machinic mythology, and concepttechnics which routes, reroutes, and criss-crosses the Black Atlantic” (Eshun 1999: 00[-006]).

Madeleine Akrich defines a process to describe the above creative mis-uses with her account of “de-scripting,” in which the intended use and design of a technological object — “*the world inscribed in the object*” by the designer, in short, its “script” — is mis-translated into unpredictable effects and mis-uses by the “user” through “*the world described by its displacement*” (1992: 208–09). I would like to extrapolate from Akrich to argue that de-scripting an object engenders a *worlding* from its mis-use. Andrew Feenberg, in an account of the sociopolitical impacts and effects of technologies, emphasises the radical capacity of de-scripting, suggesting that “new technology can often be used to undermine the existing social hierarchy” (2002: 92). What I wish to sample from Feenberg’s position in the context of black secret technologies is how, on the one channel, de-scripting technological objects produces and strengthens transcultural networks, while transforms existing social relations into new cultural assemblages (such as the five arts of hip-hop, global rave culture, gay circuit and disco clubbing, etc.), but also how, on the other channel, creatively mis-using technologies disseminates the very concepttechnic (“ideapraxis”) that a technological object is not a static entity, but can be deprogrammed to do something else otherwise. It is de-scripting itself that is resampled.

The sociocultural inscription of technologies — their *concepttechnics* — can be demonstrated in other ways. In 1969, Sun Ra travelled to Robert Moog’s synthesizer studios where, according to John Szwed,

he tried to play a touch-sensitive theremin that used a metallic strip for contact (1998: 276). It wouldn't work, "apparently because it responded differently to different people's skin:" "You know what that means," Sonny joked: "Even machines can be racist! We got to be ready for the space age" (Sun Ra, in Szwed 1998: 276).

Ra's story is an interesting example of epidermalised "whiteness" encoded into the use-parameters of a machine. Yet Ra visited Moog precisely because he was an early adopter of synthesizers in jazz; according to Szwed, this was not only for their unearthly sounds (in his compositions Ra would signal for a "Space Chord", his callsign for an explosion of unEarthly notes from the Arkestra), but because electronic music machines were "above all a space-age instrument; and except for the keyboard, it did look like the control panel of a rocket ship" (1998: 276).³²

I would like to suggest, then, that Afrofuturist "black secret technologies" radicalise "performativity" beyond a discursive operation of staged metaphor — from working (merely) upon the semiotic, as Gray (2005) and other critics suggest — to a concepttechnical undertaking in which technological objects are de-scripted — reconcepttechnicalised — to operate otherwise. The second point I wish to make, however, is that Afrofuturist black secret technologies not only take place "upon the object", but have *already* taken place in the production of "race" *as a technology*. In the above descriptions of de-scripting, it is not just an unintended use-practice that results from creative mis-use, but a sociocultural assemblage in which codifications and signs of "blackness" are also produced. Thus the creative mis-use of the turntable yields one component of the concepttechnical infrastructure of hip-hop culture — a culture in

32. Further examples abound: Afrofuturist/diasporic electronic music is entwined with the musico-technological enterprises of Korg, Roland, Moog, and other instrument manufacturers. Almost every genre or defining sound has been a result of "breaking" or ab-using the machine: the Roland's TR-808 and TR-909 drum machines were never meant for dance music, for example, but to replace session drummers in studio bands, while the TB-303 bassline was infamously tweaked to produce the "acid" squelch by Phuture (see Sicko 1999; Williams 2001; Reynolds 1999; Silcott 1999).

which blackness is signed and circulated. That “blackness” is not a stable identity of a universal historical subject but rather emerges from de-descriptions of concept-technical objects in the criss-crossings of Afrodiasporic transcultural currents and shaped in a hybridity of sociocultural relations is precisely what calls upon us to think blackness (“race”) as a technology.

Akin to my approach, Gray, Williams, and other critics emphasise how blackness is (always) already technologically constituted, not the least by way of the technologies of slavery. Studies such as Kevorkian’s reiterate how representations of blackness in technological environments continue to be framed in the figure of the *robot* and its redundant Czech etymology meaning “serf labour” — *slave* (2006). But there are other possibilities.

Interstellar Fugitives & Underwater Mutants

We urge all brothers and sisters of the underground to create and transmit their tones and frequencies no matter how so called primitive their equipment may be. Transmit these tones and wreak havoc on the programmers!

— Underground Resistance, *Creed*³³

Ben Williams undertakes a study of black “technomutant” becomings in the sonic politics of Detroit techno outfit Underground Resistance (UR). UR’s members consist of a multiplicity of Afrofuturist mutant beings, from cyborgs (Andre Holland), undefined alien (Mad Mike) and quasi-invisible entities (Chamaleon) to the Drexciyans (2001: 168). The Drexciyans are the aquatic inhabitants of the black Atlantic: the lost children and slaveship births thrown overboard during the Middle Passage. Signifying

33. Printed on record sleeves, stickers, shirts, and other UR paraphernalia. See <<http://undergroundresistance.com>> (accessed 27 May 2012).

the Afrofuturist capabilities of becoming and transfigurational adaptation, the Drexicyans have mutated in their underwater lairs through the process of “negative evolution”, building a secretive and seaborne aquatopia. They have also invented sonar-based sonic weaponry for defending their undersea enclaves, forming the “UR Aquatic Assault Unit” for the “Underwater Deployment of Electronic Funk Bombs”.³⁴ Aided by underwater mutagens, the aquatic becoming of the Drexiciyan undersea mutation is encapsulated in the concept of “negative evolution”, a phrase that features throughout UR’s 1998 album, *Interstellar Fugitives*. Various UR members are listed as having acquired various gene types and stages of negative evolution. The phrase becomes a UR track title, in which a phased, unearthly voice intones: “This is the voice of UR... we are your species”, before a cyborg baritone repeats “negative evolution” over the submersible funk of an electro backbeat. In UR’s MythScience, *negative evolution* traces the reversal of humanisation: thrown overboard, Drexicya have achieved, according to UR’s personnel files on the rear of the album cover, “Gene Type: 2 (Full Negative Evolution Sequence Completed)”. Negative evolution is Afrofuturist dehumanisation: an abandonment of the human form. On the electro track “Aquatacizem” and the vocoded transmission from the deep, “Interstellar Crime Report”, Drexiciya and their MythScience explore

the existence of a mutant strain of African American genes that has produced such historical “warrior” figures as Martin Luther King and Nelson Mandela. What these mutant beings have in common with the cyborg, rather than the robot, is their theorization of a fundamental technological alteration in, rather than extension of, what it means to be human (Williams 2001: 169).

Williams’ assessment of Drexicya recapitulates how “technology” is not prosthesised as an “extension

34. Quotations from the *Interstellar Fugitives* (1998) record sleeve.

of man” (as conceived in posthumanist trajectories), but rather as a mutation or *negative evolution* incorporated within the Afrofuturist production of becoming. The alteration “within” the human is ultimately its abandonment through negative evolution, the becoming of which is signified by Gene Type 2. Technology is constitutive to this mutation: in UR’s MythScience, slavery-era technologies of transportation, surveillance, incarceration, and forced labour are reconceptualised — by way of a chronopolitics — as concepttechnical catalysts for the aquatic devolution of the Drexicyans.

Underground Resistance and the Drexicyans perform an important task: they shift the association of blackness from “the natural machine”, i.e. the black box of the subservient robot, to a becoming aquatacizem. The Drexicyan MythScience also rewrites oppressive slavery-era technics into a condition for aquatic black secret technologies.

• • •

To recapitulate: blackness is already constituted through technical operations, inscribed, transmitted, and performed through technologies, and implicated within the programming as well as creative mis-use of technologies. And the inverse: discursivity and semiotic operations are *already* a technological operation, its performative meaning wrought through concepttechnics.

That Afrofuturism is *technical* to begin with, and thus at work in the technical production of blackness, remains the unthought dark matter of moves that attempt to constrain Afrofuturism within narratives that separate concept from technics.³⁵

35. Theses that resonate with the work of Afrofuturists Eshun (1999), Miller (2004), Sun Ra (2005b), RAMM:ΣLL:ZΣΣ (2003), but also philosophers and cultural theorists such as Stiegler (1998), Hansen (2004), Derrida (1997), Hayles (1999), and Haraway (2004a).

— Futurism (Racing Past the Past Again)

That Afrofuturism is addressed as if its operations require theoretical correctives remains a persistent feature of its academic reception. In this section I wish to turn to the way in which various assumptions constrain Afrofuturist concepttechnics. J. Griffiths Rollefson, for example, argues that Afrofuturist MythScience “collapses tropes of white science and black magic one onto the other” (2008: 86). Rollefson’s “robot voodoo power” thesis — the phrase is sampled from Afrofuturist hip-hop emcee and Jupiter-born Dr Octagon, a.k.a. Kool Keith, from his 1996 album³⁶ — takes at face value that technologies are encoded as white. The assumption that technology is *de jure* the providence of whiteness mimics the rhetoric of the digital divide; it is the discourse to which Nelson positions Afrofuturism *against*. Yet Rollefson sees this assumption as the very “premise of Afrofuturism”:

the very premise of Afrofuturism relies on the normalized disparity between blackness and the cybernetic technological future — a binary that is reflected in the racially coded phrase ‘digital divide’. . . . Thus, the danger with the Afrofuturist strategy is that it can quickly turn into a reification of black inferiority through simple contrast with supposed ‘white’ technologies (2008: 85).

On the contrary, Afrofuturism is not *premised* on such a normalised disparity and its racialisation of the digital divide: it is already taking place before such disparities have been reified precisely because *blackness is a technology*. Though Rollefson here also conflates Afrofuturist scholarship to its object, I wish to turn to a further problematic: that of the desire to “fix” or “correct” Afrofuturism.

For Rollefson, following through on the above premise, there is the need to apply a “partial

36. Named *Dr. Octagon* in the US, *Dr. Octagonecologist* in the UK. There is also a third variant with the vinyl LP release on Mo Wax: *Dr. Octagon: Ecologist*. That the European releases played with a more complex conceptual portmanteau that better outlines Dr. Octagon’s gyno-ecological probing of earthly bodies deserves further investigation.

corrective for this potential pitfall of the Afrofuturist project” by proposing “a theoretical framework for Afrofuturism premised on Paul Gilroy’s notion of ‘anti-anti-essentialism’” (2008: 85).³⁷ Thus Rollefson dutifully imposes a theoretical framework of anti-anti-essentialist blackness. The problem is not that Rollefson identifies an undecidably strategic essentialism within Afrofuturist discourse. The problem is that: (a) Rollefson does not turn to the resources of Afrofuturist concepttechnics and MythSciences to *read the problematic*, and (b), when he does turn to Dr Octagon to theorise an anti-anti-essentialist blackness, it is already from the position of imposing it as a corrective, and of *deciding*, in the name of Afrofuturism, to adopt strategic essentialism at the expense of a constitutive ambiguity to Afrofuturist becoming.³⁸ This also takes place under the above conflation. It is the general maneuver, here, that demands to be rethought.

Bennett also critiques the narrative of Afrofuturism’s unfolding as a scholarly concept, insofar as “Afrofuturism needs a more complex and substantial theorizing” — a point which this project affirms. Bennett notes that “the defining motif of the Afrofuturist response, as the name implies, has been the placement of *futures* as the entry point to analysis of Black technopolitics. But there is possibly more in the name that requires our attention” (2006: 252). Which is correct: Bennett ignores Afrofuturist chronopolitics that retrieve the *past*. It is strange, then, that Bennett’s central concern is the philosophical *inheritance* of Afrofuturism, which he sees as linked to the politico-aesthetics of Russian and Italian Futurism of the early 20th century — and whose members he problematically characterises

37. In respect to strategic anti-anti-essentialism, Gray’s thesis is that “I try to show that black people, in particular musicians, have been at the forefront of using new technologies to extend, reshape, and remix black identities, thereby changing both the cultural terms of the technologies and people’s identities” (2005: 150). While I do wish to detract from this project, the explicitly transcultural formations of Detroit techno and hip-hop, for example, are classic examples of white/black cross-pollination aided by Japanese-made technologies (i.e., the Roland series drum machines and synthesizers). Hence “blackness”, as “whiteness” or any other epidermalised raciology is always already unbound through black Atlantic globalisation.

38. Somewhat ironically, Rollefson articulates anti-anti-essentialism to Kool Keith’s phrase “robot voodoo power” as a simile of MythScience, but he does so in such a way that he reaffirms the theoretical assemblage of anti-anti-essentialism and the false premise he begins with, rather than inquiring as to how such questions are addressed within Afrofuturist production.

in both distinct historical movements as “avowed fascists”³⁹ — as well as the “hurdle” of Friedrich Nietzsche’s corpus in Eshun’s articulation of chronopolitics. This triple inheritance, if it need be said, is entirely nonspecific to Afrofuturism. It is also not particularly central to its theorisation or production.

While Nietzsche informs Eshun’s chronopolitics, it is no more nor less a ghost of Afrofuturism’s past than its inheritance of science and speculative fiction, occult and mystical theosophy, or its allies in Afrocentrist, Africanist, and anticolonialist thought that recover and reimagine ancient Kemetian philosophy and history.

Why is it also assumed that Afrofuturism is but the *effect* of the Western avant-garde and its politico-aesthetics? Such a discourse ignores that the avant-garde movements of the early twentieth century, notably the *bruitisme* of the Cabaret Voltaire to Picasso’s “primitivist” sculpture and painting, undertake prolific samplings of pan-Africanist cultures, in which “the Other, often black or brown, became a catalyst for modern art” (Gikandi 2006: 32). Picasso was an avid collector of Africanist sculpture after his discovery of African art objects in 1907; yet Picasso also undertook African nude studies during the 1890s, leading Simon Gikandi to theorise that the figure of Africa operates as the repressed or unconscious “intercessor” to Picasso’s struggle against the Western tradition (2006: 40). More evident is the role of “Africa” in the breakthrough of his “Negro period” of 1906–08 — and all that followed, notably Cubism, which provided the basis for the later geometricist developments of Russian Futurist

39. Though inspired by the aesthetic principles of Filippo Marinetti’s 1909 *Futurist Manifesto*, Russian Futurism was less concerned with its military-industrial politics, ignoring most of its fetishisations of violence and noise. Russian visual production was concerned with geometrism, leading to Malevich’s 1915 manifesto, *From Cubism to Suprematism*, and the exhibition of his first *Black Square* (as recetly depicted in grand scale during the opening ceremonies of the 2014 Sochi Olympics). The Russian Futurist poet Mayakovsky opposed the wholesale and industrial slaughter of the First World War (unlike its celebration by Marinetti) and welcomed the Bolshevik revolution. Under Lenin and Trotsky, Russian Futurism was initially welcomed into the avant-garde aesthetics of the Soviet state, with Malevich appointed director of the Petrograd State Institute of Artistic Culture. Within a few years, the aesthetic tide had turned, Stalin and the aesthetics of social realism rose to power, and Suprematism was denounced as bourgeois, leaving little room for Malevich’s modernism in which “art does not need us, and it never did”. It goes without saying that Russian Futurism cannot be conflated with fascism; nor can it be collapsed to its Italian namesake.

Suprematicism.⁴⁰

But one need not only turn to Picasso. Douglas Khan notes that DADA poet Richard Huelsenbeck recited “Negro poems” brought to him by former seaman Jan Ephraim, “ostensibly written in a ‘Negro language’”, and to which Huelsenbeck added the nonsense noise of *umbra umbra*. Though Huelsenbeck and Tristan Tzara would later travel to Africa, Khan writes that these “Negro poems were clearly part of the trivializing appropriation of other cultures that Europeans found necessary to vitalize their own” (2001: 47). Here, the apparent nonsense of Africanist languages spouted by various Europeans in a Zurich nightclub fulfilled the DADA manifesto of anti-art: in short, the “Negro language” occupies the position of the ugly and of anti-art to Western art’s valorisation of the beautiful/sublime. It is in this respect that Sarah Nuttall argues that “the first register within which discourses of beauty in Africa need to be understood, then, has to do with the inscription of Africa in dominant western aesthetic discourses as the figure of the ugly” (Nuttall 2006b: 9). Without downplaying Picasso’s evident fascination with Africanist art⁴¹ — the acknowledged aesthetic basis not just for “primitivism”, but for Cubism — Gikandi critiques Picasso for attempting to “separate the African’s art from his or her body; to abstract, as it were, those elements of the art form that would serve his purpose at crucial moments in his struggle with established conventions of Western art” (2006: 33). Indeed, Gikandi contends that:

... the practitioners of modernism had themselves started the process of containment, that they needed the primitive in order to carry out their representational revolution, but that once this task had been accomplished, the Other needed to be evacuated from the scene of the modern so that it could enter the institutions of high art. How else can we explain the paradox that runs throughout the history of modernism, the fact that almost without exception the Other is

40. Gikandi approaches the details: “Indeed, as Natasha Staller has shown, Picasso’s engagement with the myth of Africa predates his 1904 move to Paris or his 1907 discovery of African art objects at the Old Trocadéro” (2006: 36).

41. Nor his support of anticolonial movements.

considered to be part of the narrative of modern art yet not central enough to be considered constitutive? To put it more specifically, why is it possible to argue simultaneously that the discovery of African and Oceanic art enabled the moment of modernism yet claim that these works did not have a fundamental influence in the shaping of modernism? (Gikandi 2006: 34)

The question of Afrofuturism's inheritance ought to be inverted: what if Afrofuturism is thought as the very precursor of its Western namesakes? What if its "Futurism" is not just understood as producing Afro-temporalities of futurity, but as the *past* futurism from which Western modernism derived its own "representational revolution"? Is this not how modernist artists interpreted Africanist and Oceanic *objets primitives*, as the future of Western (anti)art? Afrofuturology reverses the temporal direction of Western art history: the Africanist and Oceanic aesthetic *past* is the *future* of Western art. Such a thinking appears inverted, and remains a struggle to hypothesise, precisely because — as Frederic Jameson argues — the ideology of modernism "imposes its conceptual limitations on our aesthetic thinking and our taste and judgment, and in its own way projects an utterly distorted model of (literary or art) history" (1988: 117).

Evidently, upending the usual timeline whereby Afrofuturism follows from — or is but an echo of — the radical aesthetico-politico innovations of the Western avant-garde and its "futurisms" suggests another facet of addressing Afrofuturism's force: that Eshun's chronopolitics cannot just be relegated to a philosophical sideshow of Nietzsche and Italian or Russian Futurism. Undertaking a critical and conceptual rethinking of all that subsides in the latent force of "Afrofuturism" means utilising its resources — in particular its chronopolitics — to undertake a revisioning of the historical conditionality that perpetually privileges "Western" narratives. Nor is this rethinking all that radical; it follows from what Gikandi calls "a banal question . . . the countless debates surrounding the influence of Africa as the

mark of Picasso's modernist breakthrough and, inevitably, the centrality of primitivism in his aesthetic practices" (2006: 34).

By taking up Bennett's call to more substantially theorise all that remains in the name of Afrofuturism — and thus its inheritance — new avenues of research present themselves that challenge programmatic approaches to the origin narratives of Western modernist art and the tales of the avant-garde. One can imagine a series of reversals in which modernist art would appear as but a late effect of Africanist aesthetic futurism. We may also infer that the historical start-date for an "Afrofuturism" ought to be rewound back into the records. If, as I have mentioned above, Yaszek speaks of late nineteenth century Afrofuturist science fiction (2006), might we not argue for an Afrofuturism that travels back *centuries*? It is here that Ra's performative becoming as an ancient alien and Kemetian deity ought to be addressed: as a past futurism unearthed.⁴² What historical avenues of rethinking the Afrofuturist lineage remain as but dark matter, yet to be thought?

Posthumanism & Hypersoul Humanisms

In closing, I would like to turn to the question of the *posthuman* in respect to Afrofuturism. Can Afrofuturism be contained under existing discourses of posthumanism? What role does "race" play in the post-human? Ytasha Womack notes her fascination with "the growing number of artists . . . who [are] developing art exploring people of color and the future. . . . and all utilizing black characters or aesthetics to deconstruct images of the past to revisualize the future" (2013: 22). The question remains,

42. As Rollefson remarks — and though I question the "authentic" content of its recovery — "In order to expose this false utopia [of a whitewashed future] the Afrofuturist project also focuses on the *past* through its tactical recovery of black soul" (2008: 85).

however, as to whether blackness is to be deconstructed in the very same “revisualization”, and if so, what the effects are upon its sociological referents in black bodies. As Womack writes, “the notion of bending time erases the prism of race-based limitations that all too often lace the present and define the recent past” (2013: 154). But does this simply translate, as D. Denenge Akpem suggests, into “self empowerment” (in Womack 2013: 154)? Or is there not a de-scripting of the technology of “race” undertaken in the above practices, and if so, would such a de-scripting signal a post-human trajectory?

To address these questions, I would like to trace one of the few scholarly debates around Afrofuturism: Alexander Weheliye’s critique of Kodwo Eshun’s Afrofuturist “posthumanism”. This debate has particular relevance to positioning Afrofuturist trajectories that abandon the category of the human. This debate also elucidates the complex historiography in which Afrofuturism is inscribed as an “effect” of slavery. At stake is the value of the “human” but also the strategies of the “dehumanised”.

To approach Weheliye’s argument, I begin with N. Katharine Hayles, who in *How We Became Posthuman* critiques the “liberal subject” of posthumanist discourse. Hayles details how the liberal subject has been presumed throughout techno-informatic discourses that have drawn their reference points from the Macy Conference on Cybernetics (1941–60), notably participants Norbert Wiener, Claude Shannon, John von Neumann, Gregory Bateson, and others who sought to make “information seem more important than materiality” (1999: 50). Despite, or perhaps because of the radical challenge that cybernetics poses to the human subject — displacing it through “conceptualizing control, communication, and information as an integrated system” in which “cybernetics radically changed how boundaries were conceived” (Hayles 1999: 84) — the values of liberal humanism were encoded within techno-informatic discourse and its programming: that of a “coherent, rational self, the right of that self

to autonomy and freedom, and a sense of agency linked with a belief in enlightened self-interest” (Hayles 1999: 86). “The cybernetic machine”, writes Hayles, “was to be designed so that it did not threaten the autonomous, self-regulating subject of liberal humanism” (1999: 86). While this desire produces a host of contradictions — granted the increasingly powerful and autonomous control systems of informatisation detailed by Kittler (1997) — it also led to what became known as “the California Ideology” and its celebration of neoliberal and technolibertarian capitalism in the production of personal computers, mobile devices, and of course, the internet (see Lovink 2002). Perhaps the most emblematic figure of technoliberal humanism is Ray Kurzweil,⁴³ who argues for the overcoming of human biology — the uploading of our brains into computers by 2045 with the replacement of the human body within 90 years — as well as the resurrection of the dead by cloning DNA into Artificial Intelligence machines (2005). Such techno-informatisation of human “intelligence”, though increasingly possible, assumes the stable, essential core of the liberal humanist subject: that the posthuman “self” can be detached from the body and remain “the same”. It is this assumption that Hayles critiques.

As Hayles writes, “the posthuman self is an amalgam, a collection of heterogeneous components, a material-informational entity whose boundaries undergo continuous construction and reconstruction” precisely because “information lost its body” (Hayles 1999: 2–3). Such digitised posthumanisms, disembodied and immortal, do not “[abandon] the autonomous liberal subject”, argues Hayles, but rather “[expands] its prerogatives into the realm of the posthuman” (1999: 287). The disembodied dream of the posthuman evolutionary stage becomes an extension of the liberal human subject. The

43. Whose liberal humanism notwithstanding is a prolific and successful inventor, producing a number of computing and reading machines for the blind, including the first flatbed scanner and text-to-speech software in 1976, which has since shrunk to a handheld device released in 2005. After meeting Stevie Wonder in 1982, Kurzweil designed and manufactured a synthesizer that mimicked real-world instrumentation, the Kurzweil K250 (1984). In 1999, Kurzweil created “FatKat”, an Artificial Intelligence controlled hedge fund that began trading in 2006. His life and various books have been sold for movie rights. A documentary called *Transcendent Man* premiered at the Tribeca Film Festival in 2009.

posthuman, rather than acknowledging a becoming that would de-construct the human, becomes a digital yet transcendental repository of liberal humanism. Supposedly neutral posthumanity, in its digitisation that disavows the meaningfulness of the flesh, merely recapitulates the (patriarchal) myth of an autogenetic liberal subject. Doing away with “the body” also conveniently obviates the need for human reproduction, producing the final solution for the messy bodies of women, and even messier coordinates of queer bodies.

I would like to suggest that Afrofuturist becomings embrace Hayles’ critique of liberal humanism and its desire for disembodied posthumanisms. Such is the implicit point of Williams above: that Drexciya undertake, contra a disembodied posthumanism, “a fundamental technological alteration in, rather than extension of, what it means to be human” (Williams 2001: 169).

In the figure of Drexciya, Afrofuturism remains suspicious of the uncritical embrace of notions of technological progress that fetishize digitised disembodiment as the next step in the “evolution of consciousness”. If the liberal humanist subject apparently remains after shedding its body — an essentialism retained that can only be conceived as the humanist soul that would *master* all technological transformation — the posthumanist extension of the liberal, male humanist subject into technological forms also assumes the *whiteness* of its technological mastery.

There is, however, a second point to be made in regards to Hayles, who argues for an alternative, embodied posthumanism “conducive to the long-range survival of humans and of the other life-forms” (Hayles 1999: 291). Weheliye argues that for all its discussion of deconstructing the “liberal humanist subject”, Hayles’ text nonetheless undertakes an “erasure of race” that “severely limits how we conceive of the complex interplay between ‘humans’ and informational technologies” (Weheliye 2002: 22). The

effect of this erasure of race is that “Hayles reinscribes white masculinity as the (human) point of origin from which to progress to a posthuman state” (Weheliye 2002: 23). Where Hayles does argue for a posthumanism that retains the body, its unthought neutrality, suggests Weheliye, assumes the pallor of default whiteness. Thus both disembodied posthumanism and Hayles’ alterposthumanism encode (male) whiteness as the default start and stop parameters for technological transformation.

Moving from a critique of Hayles’ *de jure* white posthumanism, Weheliye turns to the posthumanism elaborated in Kodwo Eshun’s *More Brilliant Than The Sun*. Eshun’s posthumanism is more complex than it first appears. I will first tend to its appearance, which is to say, to Weheliye’s interpretation of the polemic advanced by Eshun at the beginning of his text. This polemic is also the site of Weheliye’s critique.

Eshun, like Sinker (1992), retroactively posits Afrofuturist posthumanism as an effect of the historical conditions of slavery. The “human”, for Eshun, is a false but dangerous construct, the master race whose task was to dehumanise the other(s). There is no future, for Eshun, in the figure of the human or its values: “As a result of the dehumanizing forces of slavery, black popular music stages black subjectivity, bypassing the modality of the human in order to inhabit the posthuman” (2001: 302). For Eshun, Afrofuturist black popular music sees no reason to assume a humanist identity: the latter’s historical associations are tainted. Rather, says Eshun, Afrofuturist subjectivity turns to posthuman articulations with machinic, alien, and otherworldly becomings. These becomings, like UR’s Drexciyans, turn to “PostSoul” electronic music, rejecting all signs of the essentialist, human Soul, in both forms of subjectivity and styles of sound. This is, at first glance, the historical context in which Eshun inscribes Afrofuturist posthumanism and its “PostSoul” music.

Taking this thesis at face value, Weheliye points out that Afrofuturist PostSoul subjectivity and its electronic musical forms are but the *inverse* of white supremacy. Afrofuturism has abandoned the human and its Soulful expressions as an *effect* of historical dehumanisation. For Weheliye, the PostSoul uncritically accepts the derogatory terms that deny black Soul its humanist value. PostSoul is the dialectical shadow of white humanist supremacy. Thus, for Weheliye, Eshun's PostSoul uncritically accepts colonial and enslaved forms of dehumanisation *as* defining its origin. Rather than revisioning the human, it remains reactionary in its rejection of the human. Consequently, becoming alien remains but a negative gesture, without "positive" content. As Steve Goodman summarises in *Sonic Warfare*,

Contra Eshun, he claims that neither is it necessary for a black posthumanism to take on alien form. . . . for Weheliye, Eshun is merely inverting a binary opposition installed by colonialism itself (Goodman 2010: 166–67).

Weheliye's second point concerns the *performance* of posthumanism. Weheliye argues that Eshun rejects black bodies along with the "human". He demonstrates this by turning to Eshun's rejection of Soul. Eshun polemically rejects Soul as the sign of humanism. In his opening barrage against "CultStud" and "Soul" that prefaces *More Brilliant Than the Sun*, Eshun argues for "a Postsoul Era" (1999: 00[-005]): "Like Brussels sprouts, humanism is good for you", parodies Eshun, "nourishing, nurturing, soulwarming — and from Phyllis Wheatley to R. Kelly, present-day Rhythm 'n' Blues is in a perpetual fight for human status, a yearning for human rights, a struggle for inclusion within the human species" (1999: 00[-006]).

It is on this point that Weheliye critiques Eshun for his forced binarism of PostSoul to Soul, posthumanism to humanism. For Weheliye, the binary of the Soul/Postsoul is a false encampment, and

neglects a third position: “Hypersoul”. Hypersoul names the hybrid forms of electronic music articulated to technohumanism, wherein the human voice is rendered machinic through filters and effects such as the vocoder. As Goodman writes, “Weheliye argues, contra Hayles, that we can understand the synthesis of the human voice with intelligent machines without assuming that ‘information lost its body’” (2010: 166–67).

Hypersoul expresses the cyborg-like relationship of technology to the black body. It produces alternative black technohumanisms through hybrid black electronic musics that need not ascribe to Eshun’s Soul/PostSoul schema. The Hypersoul also need not “become alien”: it retains a strategic, but hybrid essentialism of black humanism, wherein technologies are inscribed at the origin in the construction of the “authentic” black Soul. Weheliye critiques Eshun’s dismissal of Soul as taking “the performance of the human in black literature and music at face value”:

Even though numerous cultural discourses have done their best to authenticate and naturalize the soul of black popular music, the musical practices themselves frequently defy these authenticating mechanisms by embracing new technologies, hybridities, and *self-consciousness* about the performative aspects of soul (Weheliye 2002: 30).

What Weheliye suggests is that Soul is *already* produced by inauthenticating technologies. Rather than rejecting Soul, Weheliye deconstructs it, demonstrating its constitutive technicity. Here, Weheliye echoes the construct of blackness as a technology: Soul, the supposedly authentic musical expression of blackness, is already (and “self-consciously” so) a technohumanised hybridity of machinic performativity. To this end, Weheliye’s conceptualisation of Hypersoul is entirely useful in describing various Afrofuturist and other musical forms — indeed, *all* forms of recorded music that deploy the

voice.

Weheliye concludes, then, that Eshun overcodes the Blues, R ‘n’ B, and Soul as “mimetic reflections of the humanist concept of soul” (2001: 302) in which the “humanist” modes of black musical and cultural production “are not quite as squarely opposed [to posthumanism] as Eshun imagines them to be” (2001: 303). Thus, as Goodman reiterates, “for Weheliye, a different form of posthumanism is produced [through hypersoul], ‘not mired in the residual effects of white liberal subjectivity’” (Goodman 2010: 166).

The above two points, however — that the human is an artificial construct, a technology of race, and that Soul is likewise technically produced — are not at odds to Afrofuturism, nor to Eshun. Permit me to turn to Weheliye’s construction *of* Eshun. While Weheliye’s critique is insightful, it proceeds by focusing solely on Eshun’s opening polemic. It ignores its finer points. Many of the gestures that Weheliye claims Eshun rejects — the constitutive hybridity and technicity that deconstruct the “human” — are, in fact, explicitly made by Eshun. We can see this by returning to the “origin” from which Afrofuturist posthumanism has been inscribed as an effect: slavery.

My first objection to Weheliye’s reading of Eshun is his diachronic reading of how slavery is an “origin”, or condition of Afrofuturist “posthumanism”. Slavery is an “origin” only *insofar as it is an effect* of Afrofuturist chronopolitics. It is that Afrofuturism has *retrieved* and re-read slavery as a “condition” that it has also reinscribed it *as its origin-effect*. Slavery is retroactively posited at/as the origin for the strategic aim of revealing the manufactured and contingent construct of the “human”. The relation of slavery to Afrofuturism is thus not diachronic — the original condition of white supremacy to which Afrofuturist posthumanity is but the effect, as Weheliye supposes — but synchronic: Afrofuturism

perpetually reconstructs its origin(s) through chronopolitics. The *chronopolitical* effect of retrieving slavery at the origin is undertaken specifically to highlight the latter's erasure of other origins.

Afrofuturism has also, I contend, reinscribed slavery to revalue the negative valences of dehumanisation, reading it not as the inverse of white supremacy, but as an unthought avenue in which to become otherwise: a trajectory of becoming alien. I will demonstrate this argument in detail over the following chapters.

It is worth remembering, then, that Weheliye, like Eshun, identifies slavery as the point of origin, the enveloping context to Afrofuturist trajectories:

It is precisely because slavery rendered the category of the human suspect that the reputedly humanist postslavery black cultural productions cannot and do not attribute the same meaning to humanity as white American discourses. These inscriptions of humanity in black culture provide particular performances of the human — singularities, if you will, that always incorporate their own multiplicities — as opposed to mere uncritical echoes of the white liberal humanist subject (Weheliye 2002: 30).

The problematic here is that, like the rhetoric of the digital divide, Weheliye inscribes post-humanisms as always *de jure* white. *Any* black posthumanism would be but the inverse “mere uncritical echoes” of a white liberal humanist subject. The *only* authentic avenue of singularity for Weheliye is (black) humanism. Singularities of black performance, howsoever their multiplicities, cannot become unhuman, lest they become uncritical echoes of the white liberal humanist subject. This reveals a profound constraint upon Weheliye's conceptualisation of (black) humanism, which cannot become alien nor entertain disembodiment. The overall schema further encamps humanism into epidermal registers. The result is that Weheliye's argument is unable to account for Afrofuturist becomings as

anything other than echoes of white humanism. Afrofuturism is to be dismissed as falling outside of an ethnocultural enclave of black humanism, however hybrid or hypersoul. Afrofuturism would be but the mere echo or inverse of whiteness.

Eshun entertains the undecidable and ambiguous complexities of Afrofuturist becomings that are either ignored or *de jure* rejected by Weheliye. Like Goodman, I suggest that Weheliye sidesteps a crucial aspect of Eshun's argument, made precisely where Eshun "opposes" the two tendencies, "the Soulful and the Postsoul". Eshun does so *only* to demonstrate their complicity: "But then all music is made of both tendencies running simultaneously at all levels", writes Eshun, "so you can't merely *oppose* a humanist r&b with a posthuman Techno" (Eshun 1999: 00[-004]). In Eshun, the two are *already* synthesised, explicitly so, as synchronous, and not diachronous, socio-sonic and historical forces.⁴⁴

Weheliye also characterises Eshun's argument as saying that "black posthumanism must take on an *alien* form" (my italics, Weheliye 2002: 39). Weheliye treats the term as substantive, as the uniform content of a singularly inhabited posthumanism. Eshun does not. Each instantiation of a becoming is differentiated: the "alien" in Eshun describes multiple forms in the abandonment or exodus from the human. The alien is an open-ended *form*, not a content. Contents are produced in their multiplicities.

Becoming alien also does not *negate* the body, unlike the disembodied posthumanisms that Hayles critiques. Becoming alien can also account for Hypersoul. Let me turn to an example: the dance tracks of Detroit's pioneering electro outfit of the early 1980s, Cybotron — an erstwhile prime example of

44. This sentence is entirely neglected by Weheliye. As Goodman (more critically) points out, Weheliye critiques "Hayles and Eshun for not doing something that neither of them set out to do in the first place"; as well as, according to Goodman, Weheliye "suffers from the advantage of retrospective arrogance" as the U.S. R&B that Weheliye draws upon to conceive "hypersoul" takes place *after* the publication of *More Brilliant Than the Sun* (2010: 168). The downside is that Weheliye rhetorically weakens "his more important argument regarding the need to make issues of race more central to cybertheory" (2010: 168). Weheliye's argument also takes on the "academic posturing" (Goodman's phrase) of offering a "theoretical corrective" to Afrofuturism (Rollefson's).

Weheliye's *Hypersoul* — whose seminal LP of dystopian rhythms, *Enter* (1983), is punctuated by vocoded lyricism. On the cusp of New Wave, Cybotron are an early (and influential) form of Detroit electro and techno. If we delve deeper into Eshun's text, we encounter Cybotron. Eshun writes that "Cybotron is the electronic cyborg, the alien at home in dislocation" (Eshun 1999: 07[101]). Why does Eshun claim that Cybotron are "alien", at home in dislocation? Because Cybotron voices the "alienation" of the black, diasporic cyborg, a phrase that in chapter three we will hear as "Alien Nation":

The [Cybotron] 3070 voice is remote, hollowed out, above all fey — and a dramatic secession from black macho. The import accent means singing like an alien in America, becoming an alien in Brit English, feeling at home in estrangement, out of step, bored with homeliness. . . . To listen to Cybotron is to hear the Brit voice making Techno's alienation from America audible (Eshun 1999: 07[100–1]).

Cybotron enunciates the voice of unhomely Alien Nation. This unhomeliness traverses nationalism and constraints of racialised gender through its accenting. Eshun hears in Cybotron an *Afrodiasporic* Brit voicing to which, one feels, he identifies. In the same gesture, Cybotron abandons the human in its specificity as a masculinised and racialised form — becoming an alien "in Brit English", an alien *through Hypersoul voicing, through accented and hybridised language* — while noting its distance precisely from the supposition of that form.

The final point I wish to address here is one made by both Eshun and Weheliye. Weheliye argues that Eshun cannot grasp the hybridity of *Hypersoul* because of "his neglect of social contexts. Since he brackets almost anything outside of the musical text itself, Eshun is forced to take these supposedly 'humanist' musical formations at face value" (2001: 303). This argument, however, is absurd: absurd on both sides, because Weheliye specifically recognises (and critiques) Eshun as self-reflexively situating

Afrofuturism to the sociohistorical context of slavery, a context that Eshun reiterates elsewhere (see 1999: A[193]).

While Eshun “refuses *entry* to comforting origins and social context” (1999: 00[-004]), this does not bar him from producing a chronopolitics of *Afrofuturist* socio-sonic contexts. Again, Eshun’s strategy is synchronic: origins are produced as the effects of Afrofuturist retroactivity; PostSoul is not opposed to Soul, but rather simultaneous to it. Eshun’s opening pages, entitled “Operating System for the Redesign of Sonic Reality”, are a conceptual salvo aimed at defensive readers, precisely to alienate them from their territorial stomping grounds. Its redesign is, perhaps, *too* effective. For, “hidden in plain sight”, as it were, social context abounds everywhere in Eshun. Eshun contextualises the “origins” of Detroit techno, in which, to return to the “context” of Cybotron: “Kraftwerk are to techno what Muddy Waters is to the Rolling Stones: the authentic, the origin, the real” (1999: 07[100]). Eshun’s sociocultural argument is that the “origins” of (black) American Detroit techno are to be found in (white) German electronic music — which in itself is a machinic transcoding of (black) American funk music. Eshun’s inscription of “the authentic, the origin, the real” is inscribed in a network of exchanges and relays where “origin” is posited retroactively. Eshun’s “social context” operates by way of a chronopolitical simultaneity, a synchronous retroactivity that revisions the past to remake the future in the present.

In reviewing the details of this debate, it becomes apparent that the nomenclature of posthumanism, in whatever guise, is too limited a concept to contain Afrofuturism, even as it signifies the constitutive artifice, or technology, of the human, and the latter’s inauthentic but real production of race. Its namesake better serves as a descriptor for a posthumanism to-come: as a sign that would reinscribe something other than struggles over the authenticity and origins of the “human”. Hybrid or Hyper

ethnohumanisms, for their part, remain too bound up in determining *who* or *what* is an epidermal reflection of this or that originary and authentic *ethnos*. Afrofuturism turns to different coordinates: becomings. In what follows I will further seek to complicate the above framework.

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Chapter 02

Vessels of Transfer:

Allegories of Afrofuturism in Jeff Mills and Janelle Monáe

ALL things exist, live and react in relation to space.

— jazz vocalist King Pleasure, liner notes to *Golden Days* (1960)

I wanted to land a UFO on the track.

— Model 500

Again that's the reason for the masks, we were simple "vessels of transfer" from somewhere beyond our understanding which I think people understood and could see.

— Mad Mike Banks, Underground Resistance¹

The performances, music and subjectivities of Jeff Mills and Janelle Monáe are infused with the black Atlantic imaginary of Afrofuturism. Mills, a founding member of Detroit techno outfit Underground Resistance, innovative turntablist and pioneer of minimalist techno production, has performed worldwide since the early 1990s; Monáe, in her guise as android Cindi Mayweather has risen to become the heir apparent to a futurist and freaky Afrofunk and pop tradition.²

1. Emails to author, 9–27 July 2009.

2. A tradition including Prince, James Brown, Sly & the Family Stone, and George Clinton, some of whom have supported Monáe's efforts. Explicitly seeking to maintain artistic control of her Atlanta-based Wondaland collective by eschewing major labels, Monáe garnered independent financial backing from Big Boi of Outkast (and endorsement of the notoriously reclusive Prince) to produce and distribute her releases in the competitive sphere of global pop music. Monáe's backers are Afrofuturists: Atlanta-based hip-hop crew Outkast released the 1996 album *ATLiens* — a smooth roll through heatwaves of freaky flow — where extraterrestriality allegorises the excluded middle of southern hip-hop to East/West rivalry, as well as emphasising the Alien Nation of southern blackness. Prince needs no introduction. Many Afrofuturist artists have operated on the fringes of the major labels, establishing independent means of financing, producing, distributing, and releasing their productions — nearly all Afrofuturist electronic music and jazz falls into this category — or, such as in the case of post-36 *Chambers* Wu-Tang Clan, establishing autonomous contractual relations when interfacing with conglomerate interests.

Their respective global reach demonstrates Paul Gilroy's observation that the black Atlantic — and here I recapitulate: the “non-traditional tradition, an irreducibly modern, ex-centric, unstable, and asymmetrical cultural ensemble” of the Afrodiaspora (1993: 198) — communicates and establishes shared identities and nodal points of history through call-and-response forms of music even as its subjects are “separated in space and time or divided by the technologies of sound reproduction and the commodity form” (1993: 102).³ We might understand Mills and Monáe as continuing the black Atlantic ex-centric counter-tradition by disseminating an Afrofuturist “cultural broadcast” that feeds “a new metaphysics of blackness” that becomes enacted “within the underground, alternative, public spaces constituted around an expressive culture . . . dominated by music” (Gilroy 1993: 83). Yet what precisely is meant by “blackness” in a context which is Afrofuturist? In which Monáe's Cindi Mayweather is an android on the run from human authorities, and in which Mills has become the Messenger, a time-and-space traveller returning from the future to forewarn us of the catastrophic results of first contact with extraterrestrials? In this chapter, I will address questions of how Afrofuturist becomings engage yet transform blackness.

Such “identities” — which I here adopt as fluid and performative — often lend themselves to a movement that exceeds their characterisation as stage personae, suggesting a *becoming* that transforms the coordinates of subjectivity. “Becoming” is deployed here to denote a transformative process that exceeds the constraints of identity and representation even as it traverses them. The coordinates of the subject are the Earthly and terrestrial markers that ground the latter to its default representation in the

3. Ytasha Womack describes how the internet has disseminated the works and concepts of Afrofuturism, producing the conditions for a global arts movement that now identifies with the term (2013). From a vantage of 1990s media theory, Geert Lovink details the backlash of global informatisation, noting that “rapid expansion of the media universe comes with an implosion of the power of imagination” (2002: 282). I touched upon this latter point in chapter one, where Afrofuturism is reduced to progress narratives focusing on access to information technologies (and today, “social media”) that are consumer portals for datamining.

fictional construct of “the human” as the “master race”. What is at stake in such becomings is twofold: a transformation of blackness, in its representation and identity, that passes through (an) unhumanity, articulated with a becoming that abandons the human (being) and its hierarchy of raciology.

But first, we need to ask whether Afrofuturist “identities” — its androids, aliens, cyborgs, etc. — “represent”, in an allegorical mode, conditions of Afrodiasporic experience (epidermalised “blackness”) — or whether Afrofuturism is capable of unhinging allegorical referents to humanist bodies and terrestrial markers of difference, thereby developing autonomous forms of becoming and thought: rather than a “a new metaphysics of blackness”, do we not encounter a “MythScience” that challenges our previously held conceptions of blackness and of metaphysics?

Prelude I. The Messenger

Jeff Mills is crouched over his equipment: his fingers gracefully flying over the DJ mixer, silver headphones cocked on his head, his intense gaze taking in the five glowing Pioneer CDJs that surround him in a semi-circle. A heavy black cloth drapes the stage like a ceremonial shroud. Mills is a lone figure on stage, intense and focused, as if manning a solo soundship, the navigator of a relentless barrage of intergalactic techno (see fig. 2). The outerspace symbolism of Mills’ multimedia composition is not accidental: the sights and sounds of Afrofuturism pervade the haunting, minimalist performance. A science fictional array of bleeps, squelches and synthesizers crack audibly like solar flares, punctuating the intensive polyrhythms and driving bass; behind Mills, a photograph of Earth’s moon fills the massive projection screen (see fig. 3 below).⁴ Among the scattered scenes of planetary electronic dance music

4. For a decent fan video of the performance, see < <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fb6NiTZB6Lc>>, and for a Roland TR-909

culture,⁵ Mills' performance is emblematic of Afrofuturism.

Afrofuturism invokes multiple strategies. On one level, its narratological and fictive operations seek to represent black subjects in futurist timelines. On other levels, it utilises alternate timelines and other worlds as allegories capable of representing *but also transforming* the coordinates of the present — a “present” whose ground determines the coordinates of subjectivity, of human being.⁶ Traversing these two levels are becomings that, as futurist representations and identities of blackness, challenge the meaning of “race” in post-humanist timelines — but only effectively so (and this is the Afrofuturist contention) that they outflow their mere representation, which is to say, their categorisation as simulacra to a “real subjectivity” grounded in human being.⁷

As I have suggested, Afrofuturism also provides a framework for deciphering its “MythSciences” and “AlterDestinies”. Its reflexivity produces its own tools of interpretation. To return to Nabeel Zuberi, Afrofuturism “codifies, organises and maps an alternative cultural history and critical framework for [Afrodiasporic] media production” (2004: 79).⁸ This includes the entry of Afrofuturism into scholarship, where, as I detailed in the first chapter, since the early 1990s a nascent field of “Afrofuturist studies” has begun to appear in a number of disparate publications, undertaking genealogies of Afrofuturist motifs in literature, film, music, and other media.⁹

improvised set, see <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=06c-xOtPL7o>>.

5. What is denoted in its field as Electronic Dance Music Culture (EDMC) Studies; its primary Journal is *Dancecult: Journal of Electronic Dance Music Culture*, in which a version of this chapter was published (see van Veen 2013b).

6. I will further pursue the metaphysics of the present in chapter five.

7. As Yaszek writes, “contemporary Afrofuturists assume that in the future race will continue to matter to individuals and entire civilizations alike” (2006: 43). Yet, as Gilroy has argued (2004: 2004), and as I pursue here, “race” itself is subject to futurist transformation. Of interest, scholars have yet to trace Afrofuturist philosophical epistemes or the musical antecedents that would presage Sun Ra and John Coltrane’s outerspace jazz. Given the mixture of religious, ritual and occult practices that infuse Afrofuturism, the future might unearth a past speculative tradition more ancient than previously envisioned. At the very least, as previously suggested, Africanist aesthetic practices were appropriated by European artists for the future art of modernism (see Gikandi 2006).

8. I have here replaced “African-American”, as I have elsewhere in other quotes, with “Afrodiasporic”. I maintain that Afrofuturism is not only an Afrodiasporic futurology (as does Gilroy, 2004) but an (inter)planetary episteme.

9. For an introductory list of Afrofuturist scholars informing (and where possible cited within) this article, see Dery (1994); Eshun

The development and imaginative embrace of alien, machinic, astral, and cyborg subjectivities in Afrofuturism, all of which abandon or modify the archetypal, Enlightenment form of the human — from Janelle Monáe’s ArchAndroid to Jeff Mills’ Messenger — offer an escape hatch from paradigms for Afrodiasporic identity that are all too often restricted to the violence and capitalist bling of ghetto realism, confined to post-slavery resonances of subalternity, or entrapped within the lingering effects of the Civil Rights era, in which African-Americans had to struggle, over the course of a long century since the Emancipation Proclamation, for the right to be considered Enlightenment subjects. To this end, as Kodwo Eshun argues, “it’s in music that you get the sense that most African-Americans owe *nothing* to the status of the human. African-Americans still had to protest, still had to *riot*, to be judged Enlightenment humans in the 1960s” (1999: A[193]).¹⁰ Hence the transformative capacity of the alien, and of Afrofuturist science fictional approaches, that explore *unEarthly* universes, timelines, and identities. When the “human” is nothing but the historical entitlement of white supremacy, signifying an embodied technology of exclusion, there is little reason to invest within the very same paradigm that was once deployed to systemically oppress and enslave one’s ancestors.¹¹

(1999); Nelson (2002); Rollefson (2008); Sinker (1993); van Veen (2003, 2003a); Weheliye (2005); Williams (2001); Womack (2013); Yaszek (2005, 2006); and Zuberi (2004).

10. A quote that I will return to in longer form in later chapters.

11. This is, of course, the *Afrofuturist* reading of the “human”.



Figure 2. Jeff Mills at MUTEK 2012, Montréal. Photo: Mutek.org.

Even at the outset, with its aliens and androids, Afrofuturism is full of unbelievable figures and outright paradoxes. This is not surprising, given the mythical status — and extensive mythical systems — of its practitioners, in particular Sun Ra, the ancient alien Pharaoh from Saturn, jazz composer, philosopher poet, and Arkestra bandleader, whose music novelist Anthony Joseph alluded to as “transcendent jazz — the metaphysics of another world” (2006: 120). But inside of Ra’s MythSystem (his “Heliocentric Worlds”),¹² and at a far remove from Ra’s outerspace jazz, one finds The Jonzun Crew, an alien-cyborg collective who, in 1982’s electro-robotic “Pack Jam (Look Out For the OVC)”, tell the

12. *The Heliocentric Worlds of Sun Ra* (1965), later issued as volumes one and two, was for many listeners the first widely available compendium of Ra’s space jazz, released on ESP-Disk (most releases up to this point had been on El Saturn Records, the Arkestra’s small-run, limited distribution label featuring handmade artwork, managed by Alton Abraham and often sold exclusively at performances).

listener to beware The Outerspace Visual Communicator — the visual light organ built for Sun Ra by Bill Sebastian whose luminary effects were rumoured to produce alien visitations (see Tompkins 2010: 114). I mention this strange connection between Sun Ra, who began recording jazz in the late 1940s, and The Jonzun Crew, the 1980s electro-pop vocoder outfit, to illustrate the diverse connections Afrofuturism effects through its alien belongings. Mark Dery's wide-ranging and evocative 1993 roundtable revealed an entire universe of black cultural production — a vast network of literature, music, performing and visual arts, embracing outsider practices of graffiti, hip-hop, comic books, electronic music, film, and media art:

If there is an Afrofuturism, it must be sought in unlikely places, constellated from far-flung points. Glimpses of it can be caught in Jean-Michel Basquiat paintings such as *Molasses*, which features a pie-eyed, snaggletoothed robot; in movies such as John Sayles's *The Brother from Another Planet* and Lizzie Borden's *Born in Flames*; in records such as Jimi Hendrix's *Electric Ladyland*, George Clinton's *Computer Games*, Herbie Hancock's *Future Shock*, and Bernie Worrell's *Blacktronic Science*; and in the intergalactic big-band jazz churned out by Sun Ra's Omniverse Arkestra, Parliament-Funkadelic's Dr. Seussian astrofunk, and Lee "Scratch" Perry's dub reggae, which at its eeriest sounds as if it were made of dark matter and recorded in the crushing gravity field of a black hole ("Angel Gabriel and the Space Boots" is a typical title) (Dery 1994a: 182).

Afrofuturism confronts the participant with these mythical figures that nonetheless "walk the Earth". Such fantastical becomings — what Sun Ra called the "Living Myth" of his own impossibility — confront the scholar with a choice, or rather, upset the divide in Western thought between myth and science, fact and fiction, the real and the imaginary. In the close to his interview "Motion Capture" in *More Brilliant Than The Sun* (1999), Kodwo Eshun argues that either one begins by accepting the interesting effects of the impossibility, for example, that Sun Ra was born on Saturn, and is the return

(from the future) of an ancient alien deity who once ruled Kemet — the Afrocentrist name for the revisionist history/myth of black Pharaohnic Egypt — or one dismisses Ra’s extravagance as *merely* fiction, his thought as *merely* poetic, his jazz as *merely* music, his entire strategy here on Earth as *merely* that of an intriguing but irreverent artist, who nonetheless isn’t as “serious” or “politically effective” compared to his fellow Africentric travellers of the era,¹³ such as Malcolm X, the Nation of Islam, or the Black Panthers. To bow to the latter dismissal, which would eschew all that strays from the gravity of the supposedly serious path of outright political action, however, is to leave the greatest fiction of all — consensual reality and its imperial history — unquestioned. It is also to ignore the equally fantastical elements of the Black Panthers (who housed Sun Ra when he taught at Berkeley in 1971; (see Kreiss 2008: 2008)), and the Yacub/Mother Plane mythotheology of the Nation of Islam.¹⁴ To sidestep the tricky dynamics by which *myth informs reality*, in which *fiction builds fact*, is to not only enact a puritanical division that in-itself is fictive, but it is to close the door upon creative strategies of manifesting other worlds and AlterDestinies — which is to say, transformed Afrofutures, futures otherwise for us all — just as it is to leave unquestioned the reality that, apparently, we are all human — just some more human than others. It is also to decisively ignore the fact that for hundreds of years, Africanist peoples were subjected to the fiction of biological inferiority and thus, the fact of slavery. This constitutively contaminated relation between fact/fiction is known in the work of Sun Ra as

MythScience:

13. I deploy a casual distinction throughout this thesis between *Africentrism*, denoting a privileging of pan-Africanist cultural expressions, and *Afrocentrism*, the latter a movement of black (inter)nationalism and (in its earlier naming) “Negritude”. I will further develop these distinctions in chapters three and four.

14. As expressed in Elijah Muhammad’s *Message to the Blackman in America* (1965), including the origin myth of Yacub, the mad black scientist who invented the white man, and Ezekiel’s Wheel, the orbiting “Mother Plane” UFO with bombers poised to obliterate white peoples (see Muhammad 2004). The latter offers an intriguing science fictional interpretation of Ezekiel 1:16: “The appearance of the wheels and their work was like unto the colour of a beryl: and they four had one likeness: and their appearance and their work was as it were a wheel in the middle of a wheel”. Both of these mythotheologies, I would suggest, are Afrofuturist inflections to the Nation of Islam; and as Eshun has attempted, (1999) both need to be read through George Clinton’s arrival on the Mothership of Funk.

MythScience is the field of knowledge invented by Sun Ra . . . A sample from [Paul] Virilio defines it very simply: “Science and technology develop the unknown, not knowledge. Science develops what is not rational” (Eshun 1999: 00[-004]).

This is to say that science, in itself, is already irrational: it partakes of myth to develop the unknown. “Ra maintains he was born on Saturn”, writes Eshun: “this blatant impossibility becomes the precondition of Ra’s outer thought, the threshold which opens out into the new world of MythScience” (1999: 09[157]). Once the impossible has been tasked — and the fiction of the slave is just such an impossibility — the threshold has been crossed: we are over into MythScience. Of course, the impossible enunciation of “I am alien” is already an act of MythScience, to which Eshun emphasises “Ra’s impossible state as an offworld alien” (Eshun 1999: 09[159]). The MythScience of Ra’s alien-ation accomplishes two operations: it (1) displaces, if not corrodes, not only the reality, but the supremacy of the human; and (2) it establishes a subversive counter-reality, a countermyth to the prevailing supremacy of the human myth.

Thus it is to the invisible paradigm of unquestioned reality — the “reality” that in the past has proclaimed the inferiority of blackness and the de jure privilege of white supremacy, that has denied certain peoples the status of “human” and cast them as alien slaves — that Afrofuturism provides its greatest challenge in the construction of *MythSciences* and the intervention of *chronopolitics*.

MythScience, as an operative concept of Afrofuturism, is the name for the science of strategic myth-making that counters the hegemonic myths that uphold consensual reality. “Reject history and mythology. Assemble countermythologies”, exclaims Eshun: “Assemble science from myth and vice versa” (Eshun 1999: 09[158]). Such a fantasy is “constitutive” in the same sense that it is

“supplementary”: it recognises that fantasy is that which is added after the fact to render the fact authentic to begin with; it is the fiction that undermines yet sustains the truth that would exclude it.¹⁵

In what follows I will further explore these concepts, thereby aiding in the development of a shared lexicon for Afrofuturist studies that, at the same time, complicates what are becoming a set of assumptions concerning the role of *allegory* in Afrofuturism. I seek to articulate these concepts — hinge them to practices, or better, demonstrate how such (technological) practices unfold the operational force of a concept (in Eshun’s language, *concepttechnics*) — by way of an immersion in two contemporary Afrofuturists, both of whom engage with electronic music and are deeply invested in dance cultures: the techno releases and DJ performances of Jeff Mills; and the android Afrofunk of Janelle Monáe. But first I begin with allegory.

Allegories of Afrofuturism

As Afrofuturist Kodwo Eshun explains, in a passage that picks up on several themes that will occupy us below,

It’s in music that you get this sense that most African-Americans owe *nothing* to the status of the human. African-Americans still had to protest, still had to *riot*, to be judged Enlightenment humans in the 1960s — it’s quite incredible. And in music, if you listen to guys like Sun Ra — I call them despots, Ra, Rammellzee, and Mad Mike [of Underground Resistance] — part of the whole thing about being an African-American alien musician, is that there’s this sense of the

15. The supplement: “their *addition* comes to *make up for* a deficiency [in the already whole], it comes to compensate for a primordial nonself-presence”; hence its “strange structure . . . by delayed reaction, a possibility produces that to which it is said to be added on” (Derrida 1973: 87, 89). The temporality of the supplement is that of time-travel: that which arrives after is the condition of possibility for that which came before. (Žižek notes it in Borges: “*The cause is posterior to the effect, the motif of the voyage is one of the consequences of this voyage*” (Borges, in Žižek 2011: 31).)

human as being a really pointless and treacherous category, a category which has *never meant anything* to African-Americans. This is particularly true with Sun Ra — just because Ra pushes it by saying that he comes from Saturn. I always accept the impossibility of this. I always start with that, where most people would try and claim it was an allegory. But it isn't an allegory: he really did come from Saturn. I try to exaggerate this impossibility . . . (Eshun 1999: A[193]).

Eshun performs a double-move that at once demonstrates the inadequacy and yet the necessity of reading Afrofuturism as allegory — precisely because he does the latter himself.

On the one channel, Eshun advocates an approach to Afrofuturism that urges us to embrace Afrofuturism's impossible claims of alien embodiment, thereby unhinging the figure of the alien from being nothing other than an allegory of the historical experience of slavery, structural racism and persistent discrimination. This crucial move allows us to think through Afrofuturism's temporal effects — how it challenges the reality of certain histories, and the history of certain realities — and thus to conceptualise its discourse as autonomous. There is no need, once allegory is unhinged, to continuously read Afrofuturism as “standing in for a reality elsewhere”. Yet, even as Eshun refuses the allegorical role of Sun Ra's alien identity, for example, he nonetheless derives the Afrofuturist critique of the human *from the historical experiences of African-Americans* and the colonial experience of the Afrodiaspora at-large.

On the other channel, Eshun refuses the *allegorical* role of Sun Ra precisely because we can understand him as saying that African-American experience remains, *in reality*, an unhuman condition: thus “African-Americans still had to protest, still had to *riot*, to be judged Enlightenment humans in the 1960s”. The reality of this fiction — that African-Americans are unhuman — is the constitutive paradox at work, for now it is the historical conditions themselves that are already unreal, as it were, and as they

remain, wherever the “real fiction” of raciology takes place. It is that racist fictions become realities, and thus inscribe real histories, with real laws and real effects, that shapes the constitutive and intractable paradox at work in considering the role of “allegory” in Afrofuturism: for what allegory is there for the fiction of racism, for experience lived as inhuman, when it is already a fiction? Thus the standard definition of allegory — as a fiction that represents the real, a literalisation technique that symbolises a referent, be it a concept, thing, event, or person — is upset. In Afrofuturism, allegory itself is the epistemological condition of possibility for the real/fiction divide. Afrofuturism itself arises from a set of historical conditions — the trauma of slavery, that in Public Enemy’s phrase, “Armageddon been in effect” (1988), but also through a shared set of non-Western belief systems and occult beliefs — that question the supposed impermeability between reality and fiction, *precisely from unreal conditions*. I will explicate this below with Janelle Monáe.

Definitions of Afrofuturism Unearthed: New Forms of the Other

Speaking on CBC Radio’s Q with Jian Ghomeshi, Monáe strikes a cool, if not unsettling poise, as if she remains undecided whether she is appearing as Monáe or as her alien-android alter-ego, Cindi Mayweather. With the release of *The Electric Lady* in 2013, Monáe has arrived at the forefront of what might be called Afropop — a fusion of soul, funk, hip-hop and R&B that references Prince, Betty Wright, James Brown, George Clinton, Michael Jackson, and Grace Jones (among others) just as it resonates with Afrofuturist motifs of the android, time travel, and outer space. Her five-part *Metropolis Suite*, now in its second album (with one extended EP), undertakes an imaginative reinterpretation of Fritz Lang’s 1927 silent film, *Metropolis*. Crucial to this reinterpretation is her subversion of Maria, the

female android who is fabricated to seduce and trick the proletarian workers of Metropolis. In Monáe's version, "slave cybergirl" #57821 becomes the ArchAndroid, the revolutionary mediator between the proles and the elites, just as her Africanist embodiment reverses Maria's whiteness to the ArchAndroid's blackness. Over the course of the Suite, the ArchAndroid is on the run from the authorities, and hides in-plain-sight, posing as the pop star Cindi Mayweather, a.k.a. The Electric Lady.

Back in CBC studios, Monáe is cool — very cool — behind the mic. As if programmed. Then she begins talking about androids:

I speak about androids because androids represent, to me, a new form of 'the other.' And I love speaking about the future because it gives us all a chance to rewrite history and do what's right — or continue to do what's wrong, and oppress those we don't understand, oppress those who may not look like us. I think it's important that those issues or subjects are still being brought to the forefront. I mean, you can parallel it all to being an immigrant in today's United States, to just being the minority in the majority. So Cindi [Mayweather, the ArchAndroid] represents the heart, the mediator between the mind and the hands (Monáe 2011).

When Janelle Monáe speaks of androids as a new form of the other, she demonstrates the allegorical force of Afrofuturism: the way in which its science fictional tropes — in particular its aliens and androids — are capable of representing experiences of the "other". What is the mode, however, of this representation? Monáe's "parallel" is the immigrant, but also a generalised experience of othering, in which oppression follows from an epidermalised and embodied, as well as gendered, visual difference, an effect of "being the minority in the majority". On stage, Monáe has often remarked before singing her anthemic "Cold War" that the song speaks to her experience as an African-American woman in the music industry. The track's second stanza is telling, in which Monáe sings, in her guise as Cindi: "If you

want to be free / The underground is the only place to be”. Here, the “underground” takes on a double signification, suggesting both Monáe’s unconventional and conceptual — which is to say, Afrofuturist — approach to the industry, itself a common trope of musical authenticity, but also Cindi’s flight, as she descends into the subterranean labyrinth of Metropolis. As if directed both to the droids and humans of Metropolis circa 2026 and the “oppressors” and “others” of today’s Earth, the chorus repeats: “This is a cold war / do you know what you’re fighting for?” Monáe’s coolness and Cindi’s androidal composure (the most composed, perhaps, since the 1950s bebop style of Miles Davis) can thus be explicated: her Afrofuturist MythSystem is an effect of the cold war, that ongoing, protracted struggle known as racism, to which the droid’s “cold war” serves as allegory.

For the most part, scholars of Afrofuturism have embraced definitions that emphasise its allegorical force, and by which allegory is understood as a fiction representing real conditions. To recapitulate a few of the definitions from chapter one in their allegorical mode: Mark Dery coined the broad definition of Afrofuturism in 1994 as Afrodiasporic “signification that appropriates images of technology and a prosthetically enhanced future” (1994a: 136) to — as Yaszek summarises — “explore how *people of color* negotiate life in a technology intensive world” (my italics, 2006: 42). Alondra Nelson presents the definition from the Afrofuturism.net listserv as Afrodiasporic “sci-fi imagery, futurist themes, and technological innovation in the *African* diaspora” (my italics, 2002: 9).¹⁶ Nelson and Paul D. Miller go on to outline the task of the Afrofuturist scholar as exploring “futurist themes in *black* cultural production and the ways in which technological innovation is changing the face of black art and culture” (my italics, 2000). More germane to EDMC, Nabeel Zuberi describes sonic Afrofuturism as “a

16. Like Dery above, Nelson’s original quote reads “African-American”, even as Nelson, on the same page, writes of “new directions in the study of African diaspora culture” (2002: 9).

black music tradition that engages with separation, escape and otherness through the tropes of Science Fiction” (my italics, Zuberi 2004). In Zuberi’s definition, the historical markers of a universalised “black experience” are likewise allegorised through science fiction.

To this end, Afrofuturist scholarship has focused on science fiction produced by Afrodiasporic authors and artists, wherein the authorial body is grounded as the “real” from which the work is read as allegory. This approach lends itself to sociological accounts of Afrodiasporic engagements with technologies (see Nelson et al. 2001). As discussed in the last chapter, Afrofuturism thus presents an imaginative realm capable of redressing the digital divide, insofar as it gestures toward a corpus of authorial Afrodiasporic bodies involved with various technological practices, as well as media that allegorise blackness in technoscientific narratives. Yet important and necessary as such analyses are, they approach their limitations when facing the unhinged force of Afrofuturist allegory, and its potential to transform the parameters of its “real” referents. What if Monáe’s “other” isn’t *just* a question of mapping its meaning back onto her (African-American, female) authorial body, and of mapping the androidal cold war onto existing conditions of racism, but of thinking through, *at the same time* — as she says — *new forms of the other*?

Monáe’s alter-ego, the alien-android Cindi Mayweather, draws attention to the *technologies* of othering. The android, which is a robot constructed to appear *as if* human, is nonetheless a second-class, mechanistic, subaltern subject. The cover of *Metropolis: The Chase Suite* (2007) depicts Mayweather/Monáe as a half-dismembered robot, her white metallic body, replete with protruding wires and a head implant, missing an entire arm, a hand, and a lower torso. The number “57821” is visible on her chest, along with a circuit board and a series of buttons. That her metallic or plastic composite body is white

suggests that her erstwhile epidermalised blackness is a skin that has been removed, revealing the cold metallic truth of her construction. That this “truth” appears as white suggests a complicated dialectic at play between black/white — that it is whiteness that has constructed blackness as other — which is elsewhere reflected in her costuming, and appreciation for uniforms, from primarily black tuxedos (circa *The ArchAndroid*, 2010) to white (*The Electric Lady*, 2013). Monáe’s play between white/black dressage and androidal embodiments suggests a more complex operation at work than that of a grounded, allegorical referent to *either* white or black bodies. Or humans. It suggests, in the words of Paul Gilroy, an operation that makes “raciology appear anachronistic” (2004: 335). But the meaning of such an anachronism, when the future appears to recall the past, is also more complex than at first appears: Monáe’s black-and-white uniformity also hints at the ways in which whiteness is the default skin for technological “black boxes”.

But what form might this *new other* take? The opening to *Metropolis: The Chase Suite* (2008), begins by narrating the plight of Cindi, who is on the run — from the authorities and their bounty hunters — as she has fallen in love with a human:

I’m an a-a-alien from outer space (outer space)
I’m a cybergirl without a face, a heart, or a mind
(a product of the man, I’m a product of the man)

I’m a slave girl without a race (without a race)
On the run cause they hate our ways and chase my kind
They’ve come to destroy me!

— Janelle Monáe, “Violet Stars Happy Hunting!” (2008)

Cindi is a product of the (hu)man: an androidal technology. “She” — as in Monáe’s world, androids

have genders¹⁷ — is also “slave girl without a race”. If she is not categorisable by race, this is because she is not human and thus (one speculates) not subject to racial ideologies of hierarchical biologism. She is nonetheless “a new form of the other”. What “other” is this, if the android does not represent — or cannot solely be reduced to — race *per se*?

Before continuing with this thread, I wish to attend to gender in Monáe/Mayweather’s androidal desire. Though without a race, does the enunciation of “slave girl” leave Cindi Mayweather as “categorisable by gender”? In Monáe’s Cindi Mayweather, however, gender is troubled. In a 2010 *Rolling Stone* interview, when questioned as to her sexuality, Monáe replied (in “character” as Mayweather): “The lesbian community has tried to claim me. But I only date androids. Nothing like an android — they don’t cheat on you” (Hoard 2010). Androidal gender ambiguity — at least in its patterns of desire — has since prevailed, with speculation over Monáe/Mayweather’s sexuality fueled by recent comments from Monáe/Mayweather such as “Women are amazing... and so are guys. . . . I feel love has no sexual orientation” (Hislop 2013). Sexual desire, of course, is distinct from gender. Though Monáe’s android is gendered, its machinic construct appears to multiply desire into androidal polysexuality. On *The Electric Lady* (2013), a caller to DJ Crash Crash’s radio show pronounces that “ROBOT LOVE IS QUEER” — to which the DJ replies, “how do you know if it’s queer, if you haven’t tried it?” (on “Our Favorite Fugitive (Interlude)”). That “queer” might have a different meaning *in Metropolis* needs to be considered. In the love ballad “PrimeTime (feat. Miguel)” (*Electric Lady*, 2013), it would *appear* that heterosexuality is posited between Miguel and Mayweather — though its desire transgresses the class

17. Which, granted Monáe’s comments about being an African-American *woman* in the music industry, demands a thinking-through of the doubled operation of difference at work in the *female* android, a motif that follows from Monáe’s inversion of Fritz Lang’s character of Maria in *Metropolis* (1927): from white to black, and from androidal double of the human Maria — who tricks the proletariat into infighting — to androidal rebel, hero of the droidal proletariat, who serves as mediator between the droids and humans (the head, heart and hands).

and humanist supremacy (“race”) boundaries that are maintained between humans (Miguel) and androids (Mayweather) in Metropolis.

In the video for “PrimeTime”, Mayweather — the fugitive rebel leader of the underclass androids, The ArchAndroid — “hides in plain sight” by working as a waitress in an android strip club for humans. Epidermal dynamics are also at play. When white patrons abuse the “female” androids and Cindi in particular, Miguel comes to Cindi’s defence in a heteronormative display of machismo, enunciating in the ballad lyrics his “true love”. Suddenly departing (or quitting) her workplace, Mayweather flips a switch and sends the exotic android dancers berserk.

A different narrative of desire is inferred in “Q.U.E.E.N. (feat. Erykah Badhu)”, also on *The Electric Lady*, in which Janelle Monáe (and not Mayweather or the ArchAndroid) has been “frozen in suspended animation” in an exhibit of “time travelling rebels”. The Wondaland band is also suspended, near naked and painted white, their bodies mimicking anthropological exhibits of “noble savages”, along with Badoula Oblongata, a.k.a. Erykah Badu. The video begins with a white museum guide introducing the civilized exhibit from a computer screen:

It’s hard to stop rebels that time travel. But we at the Time Council pride ourselves on doing just that. Welcome to the Living Museum — where legendary rebels throughout history have been frozen in suspended animation. Here in this particular exhibit, you’ll find members of Wondaland, and their notorious leader, Janelle Monáe, along with her dangerous accomplice, Badoula Oblongata. Together they launched Project Q.U.E.E.N., a musical weapons program in the 21st century. Researchers are still deciphering the nature of this program, and hunting the various freedom movements that Wondaland disguised as songs, emotion pictures, and works of art.

Woken by Wondaland rebels who reanimate the rebels by playing a white vinyl record on an exhibition turntable — the track itself, and yet another white/black inversion — Monáe interrogates: “Am I a freak? / Yet I wanna be, wanna be ... quee ... n ... r”. The near-synonymy between “queen” and “queer”, when breathlessly sung by Monáe and the Wondaland, blurs the decidability of its enunciation, and continues to complicate the MythScience of androidal / human gendering and its relation to sexual desire.

Specters of the Atlantic: Pharaohs, Aliens, and Androids

Monáe’s strategic deployment of Cindi Mayweather is successful precisely because it *unearths* a straightforward, allegorical reading of Afrodiasporic conditions of otherness — or, as I would like to suggest, because such otherness is *already an allegory*. The fictive reality of the android folds back on itself, reaching an uncomfortable point where the allegory of the android to blackness, and the *real experience of becoming an android*, have already converged in the historical trauma of slavery. The android “is a product of the man:” it has been engineered to undertake certain servile tasks — much like how African subjects were enslaved (and thus purchased, traded, and sold) as commodities.

The commodification of subjectivity is emphasised by Ian Baucom in his *Specters of the Atlantic: Finance Capital, Slavery, and the Philosophy of History* (2005). Baucom argues that it is because *humans are already “represented” as commodities* — the modernity of the “Subject \$” — that modern commodity capitalism gets its jumpstart. Baucom goes on to demonstrate that “it is to finance capital rather than to the French Revolution [as argued by Hegel] . . . that we should look for the birthplace of the modern subject, the origins of a philosophical discourse on and of the modern” (2005: 55). In short, modern

subjectivity is not born in the fire of radical democracy and the overthrow of the monarchy by the bourgeoisie: it is born in the advent of slavery as the complete commodification of the subject. It is this complete commodification of the subject, argues Baucom, that *is an effect of the general structure of allegory*.

Baucom quotes Halpern: “The commodity renders allegory obsolete by perfecting and globalizing the latter’s logic of representation. Under mature capitalism, allegory is no longer simply a literary technique but is rather the phenomenology of the entire social-material world” (Halpern 1997: 13; in Baucom 2005: 21). Allegory is thus not the “effect” of commodity capital, or to put it in crude Marxian terms, the aesthetic form of superstructure to capital’s commodity base. As Baucom writes, allegory is “something closer to an epistemological condition of possibility: a mode of representation which enables and clears the grounds for a form of capital which is an intensification and a wider practice of it” (2005: 21). The commodity — the human commodity *qua* slave, *qua* android — is “practical allegory — allegory in the sphere of social practice” (Halpern, in Baucom 2005: 21). That the Afrodiasporic slave marks the birth of modernity in the commodity form is a point already made by novelist Toni Morrison, as Kodwo Eshun remarks:

In an interview with critic Paul Gilroy in his 1991 anthology *Small Acts*, novelist Toni Morrison argued that the African subjects that experienced capture, theft, abduction, mutilation, and slavery were the first moderns. They underwent real conditions of existential homelessness, alienation, dislocation, and dehumanisation that philosophers like Nietzsche would later define as quintessentially modern. Instead of civilizing African subjects, the forced dislocation and commodification that constituted the Middle Passage meant that modernity was rendered forever suspect (Eshun 2003: 288).

The “new form of the other”, in the form of the android, the cyborg, the alien, or the X-human in general, is thus *also* the cyclic return of an old form that marks the birthplace of modernity: the commodified slave. The return of the repressed, however, is not taken as granted but futurised: it is resurrected precisely in order to transform it. But this transformation takes place *through* it: this is the trajectory of its becoming, a becoming that *transforms the allegorical mode of representation itself*. That the *new* form of the other resurrects an archival *past* is a central motif of Afrofuturism, where its futurological operations tend to themeatise ancient Africanist MythSciences. On the cover of *The ArchAndroid* (2010), Janelle Monáe appears in what appears to be a gold, Pharaohnic headdress, though uncannily so as an android, the ancient Egyptian wear transformed into a technological skyline of Metropolis itself. Monáe plays on the Afrofuturist trope of the ancient black *alien* or *android* Pharaoh, as initiated by Sun Ra’s playful (but altogether gravitational) deconstruction of Afrocentric historical revisioning, the latter exemplified in texts such as George M. James’ *Stolen Legacy* [1954], and what Gilroy outlines as “popular ‘afrocentric’ assertions that the great discoveries of Western science and technology were known to ancient Africa, stolen from their ancient sources, and then assigned by white supremacist historians to the Greeks” (2004: 339). While there is some strategic MythScience to be gleaned from Afrocentrism’s historically revisionist claims — a debate that rages around the more careful work of Martin Bernal’s *Black Athena* that I will address in chapter four¹⁸ — I would suggest that when Afrocentric historical revisioning attempts to establish monolithic historical claims that support an essentialist raciology, rather than challenge it, the black political culture that results tends toward a confined, static elaboration of both race and history that forecloses the imaginative unfolding of the

18. I will turn to *Black Athena* because of its contentious position within debates around Afrocentrism; it is emblematic of a politicised form of revisioning Eurocentric history (cf. Lefkowitz 1997).

future, and thus, is at odds with Afrofuturism.

Though I will turn to chronopolitics and Afrocentrism in more detail in chapters three and four, I wish to outline a few of its characteristics here. The coordinates of the present at stake, as Paul Gilroy outlines, is the “romantic and sentimental distaste for the racial capitalism that, at an earlier point, had made blacks themselves into commodities, [and that] is a profound factor that influences the moral conditions in which black political cultures take shape” (2004: 333). At stake in Afrofuturist temporal operations — what I have introduced as its *chronopolitics* — is a symbolic combat that challenges what Gilroy outlines as “militant vindictive [black] nationalism”, and its historical revisionism that seeks to establish an essential blackness as original or superior (2004: 338–39). In this respect, the Afrofuturist appropriation of Kemetian motifs, for example in Earth, Wind, and Fire’s pyramidal and Pharaohic fantasies,¹⁹ or Killah Priest’s pharaohic headdress on *The Psychic World of Walter Reed* (2013), expands upon rather than contracts such mythos: it elevates it to a MythScience, in which the future reveals a past transformed, and in which blackness, and black identity, is likewise unshackled from its humanist restraints — including the programmatic referral to epidermalised “blackness” as the central marker of difference. By exploring alternate forms of becoming that unbind the confines of race, Afrofuturism implicitly affirms a “widely shared sense of race consciousness as earthbound and anachronistic” just as it explicitly pursues “another mode of recognition in the most alien identity” that carries it “beyond the

19. The 1970’s funk band Earth, Wind, and Fire, undertake what Mark Sinker calls “31st Century Egyptology” (1992). The group’s emblematic album covers of neon-lit, psychedelic pyramids surrounded by phalanxes of black Pharaohs with hieroglyphic symbols “at least pretends, in its silly hermetic way, to possible heavens here below”, writes Sinker. With Earth, Wind, and Fire, like Sun Ra, the figure of the alien is revisioned in the past, particularly from the *mythos* of Kemet, where Pharaohs are hypothesised as ancient black aliens and Egyptians as the founding alien race of world civilization. At the same time, this motif is transported into the future; its “31st Century Egyptology” is that of a future return of the ancient black alien civilization, of a Egyptopia to-come in which pyramids and futurist technologies collide. On their album covers “there’s the Egyptillogical landscape lit in the glaucous redlight of Dali-ized nuclear mysticism”, writes Eshun of Shuzei Nagoaka’s artwork for Earth, Wind, and Fire’s 1979 album *I Am*: “Mushroom clouds hover in the background; Pharaohic rock statues sit next to Babylonian ziggurats powered by lines above [Buckminster] Fuller domes; transport grids run through temples built by D.W. Griffiths for his film *Intolerance*” (1999: 09[156]).

human altogether” (Gilroy 2004: 344, 348–9).

“Armageddon been in effect”: chronopolitics

Baucom’s underlying temporal thesis in *Specters of the Atlantic* (drawn from Walter Benjamin) is that of an eternal return that marks the “long contemporaneity” of capitalism, “the idea that oscillating forms of capital [which we here read as embodied allegories of commodified subjectivity] inform and are informed by the shifting phenomenologies and recycled generic protocols of cultural practice” (2005: 23). The effect of cyclicity *as a historical form* means that each cycle contains within itself the ghostly aftereffect of a past cycle, in the manner of Fredric Jameson’s theory of “sedimented” genre in *The Political Unconscious*, whereby “the ideology of form itself, thus sedimented, persists into the later, more complex structure” (1981: 141). This also means that each cyclic sedimentation faces the uncanny return of its repressed: previous forms haunt, or in-form, the form of the present. What is present, however, operates as if hegemonic, as if it were the condition of its own origin: this *is* the ideology of form, of its persistence as the form of the present that makes up the reality of the present, even though its sedimentation reveals a heterogeneous composition of (repressed) cyclicities. The point I wish to make here is that temporal cyclicity is a signature that Afrofuturism inscribes into our own future from its past. Cyclicity itself is a historical form, and there are different forms of it. Thus temporal cyclicity, the looping return and its insistent repetition, is itself an insistent occupation, or motif, of Afrofuturism that changes over time, just as each one of its cycles is haunted by a repressed/sedimented *form of the cycle* — such shifts in cyclicity perhaps explaining the appeal of repetitious electronic music.²⁰ Jeff Mills’

20. And in particular, minimalist techno and dub-infected forms where the “space” around rhythms is often described (and heard) in terms of a “hauntology”, which signals an unstable ontological field in which the return of the repressed ghost-whispers in the track (see

focus on change and cyclicity in his texts and techno productions (which I will turn to below) is echoed by Monáe, who summarises the above discussion when she says “I love speaking about the future because it gives us all a chance to rewrite history”.

The effect of such cyclic temporality upon scholarship means that each Afrofuturist cycle of cyclicity, each genre of repetition, signals a form wherein “time does not pass, it accumulates” (Baucom 2005: 24). It is this accumulation of temporalities that is signified by “sedimentation”. *WIRE* journalist Mark Sinker mapped out such a sedimented temporality in his 1992 article, “Loving the Alien”, in which he suggested that the android and the alien are not just referential allegories for past or present black identity — though they also serve this *contemporaneous* purpose — but in Sun Ra’s words, “real fictions” that demonstrate the *ongoing* reality of such allegory, in which the accumulation of *past cycles of futurism* overlays the phenomenology of the unfolding present:

The advantage of Science Fiction (Sf) as a point of cultural departure is that it allows for a series of worst-case futures — of hells-on-Earth and being in them — which are woven into every kind of everyday present reality. . . . The central fact in Black Science Fiction — self-consciously so named or not — is an acknowledgement that Apocalypse already happened: that (in Public Enemy’s phrase) *Armageddon been in effect* (Sinker 1992).

I will return to the phrase “Armageddon been in effect”, and an exegesis of Sinker, in the next chapter. What I wish to introduce here is that Afrofuturism (for Public Enemy) begins with the End Times. Time is the accumulation of the apocalypse and its aftershocks. Lisa Yaszek also draws attention to how Afrofuturism interprets the present as *already* science fictional in its accumulation of past futurisms and

Fisher 2013). As Zuberi writes, “What seems to unite these diverse pieces of [hauntological] music is their attempt to capture the grain of earlier playback technologies and recording methods” (2007: 284).

their aftermaths: a post-Armageddon wasteland of exile and “Alien Nation” following from the abduction experience of Atlantic slavery (2006). Thus, like Mon  , Sinker suggests a more complex allegorical operation at work, in which representation exceeds its symbolic correlative to a referent and becomes a *Weltanschauung* — a worldview of cyclic perception and interpretation, a way of *becoming* in the world that accelerates the reality of the unreal, drawing the cycles of the future into the present in the same moment that it unearths the past’s futurisms, the effect of which is an abandonment of consensual “reality” and its norms:

The ships landed long ago: they already laid waste whole societies, abducted and genetically altered swathes of citizenry, imposed without surcease their values. Africa and America — and so by extension Europe and Asia — are already in their various ways Alien Nation. No return to normal is possible: what “normal” is there to return to? (Sinker 1992)

Sinker’s text provocatively demonstrates how Afro-futurology, inclusive of its cyclic reinterpretations of the past, alters the coordinates of the present: the contemporaneous “as-is” is revealed by Afrofuturism in its constitutive temporal abnormality. Such temporal revelations are thus transformed by Afrofuturism to *un-earthings*. Both Sinker and Mark Dery (1994a) recognised how the Afrofuturist undertaking is disruptive to white-washed visions of the future, just as it likewise exposes the colonisation of the past, what Sun Ra called the “real fictions” and “manufactured memories” that make up the all-but-erased deep history of the Afrodiaspora (2005b). If the Afrodiaspora rarely saw itself represented in mid twentieth century futurology — notable in the absence of Africanist representations in the 1964 New York World’s Fair (Samuel 2007) — today the past of Atlantic slavery is at stake, with recent educational reforms in the Lone Star state attempting to erase its traumatic history through

underhanded semiotics, as Atlantic slavery is abstracted into the “Atlantic Triangular Trade”.²¹ In all these cases, and as Gilroy reminds us, we need to “be alert to the politics of temporalization” (2004: 339).

My turn to chronopolitics and cyclicity here is in part a response to Gilroy’s call, at the end of *Between Camps*, in which he argues: “we need self-consciously to become more future-oriented. We need to look toward the future and to find political languages in which it can be discussed” (2004: 335). Gilroy hints at such a language in a passage on Afrofuturology, and in particular his focus on “music and musicians” of the “black vernacular” who have turned to “extraterrestriality, futurology, and fictions of techno-science”, precisely because “denying the future and the right to be future-oriented became an integral part of the way white supremacy functioned during and after the slave system” (2004: 337). Yet “black appeals to the future”, or at least Gilroy’s invocation of such appeals, already has a past, a particular signature of futurism. Gilroy laments the passing futurology of antiracism, just as he laments the loss of 1970s-styled Afrofuturism and how “people no longer play with the possibility of departure from the planet in the same spirit with which their predecessors had entertained the idea of return to Africa” (2004: 341, 350). I would like to suggest a few points at this time: first, that “the future” is not just (in) the future, but a particular sedimentation of past signatures whose future is yet to-come. And second, that such sedimentation has cycled past Gilroy’s focus on mid-20th century Afrofuturism (which, according to Gilroy, in-itself resurrected the spirit of Marcus Garvey and his “Back to Africa” campaigns — I will turn to such figures of *exodus* in chapters four and five). Monáe’s contemporaneity, as it references the Afrofunk of the ‘60s to ‘70s, but also Weimar modernism and ‘80s electro-funk, undertakes a novel unfolding of futurist cyclicity in our own time, transforming cycles of futurisms

21. Though the triangular nomenclature has been rescinded, similar changes remain (see Yobie 2010).

past — the early 20th century *Metropolis* narrative of Fritz Lang — through an Afrofuturist trajectory. A pervasive futurity-to-come propels Jeff Mills and techno music, as well as electronic music's futurology in general — the latter unfortunately absent from Gilroy's repertoire of Afrofuturology.

Sun Ra suspected that “invented memory” — in a quote I cycle around — was “placed in the minds of what is called man, in order to keep same from looking backward into a void... Because of what has happened” (2005a: 60). Throughout his poetic philosophy,²² Ra often depicted how the Afrodiaspora has been systematically excluded from the privilege of writing (its) history — or projecting its futures. Its conspicuous absence, however, often no better mirrors its tokenistic representation. Etienne Balibar reminds us that the stereotype of the racialised “community” is a contradiction “which sees an identity as community ascribed to collectivities which are simultaneously denied the right to define themselves” (1991: 18). This right of definition, in history and toward the future, situates chronopolitics as a “political language”.

Outside of Eshun's essay, but within Afrofuturist studies, chronopolitics remains a scarcely recognised field of political intervention, even as Afrofuturist sf has sought to address absences of Afrodiasporic futures. In the militarist and masculinist white visions of 20th century antiseptic science fictional futures — more or less leading up to *Star Trek's* debut of Lt. Nyota Uhura in 1966 — there was nary a body of colour to be found.²³ Robots and Russians were more plentiful. Keeping this in mind, we can begin to analyse how, in “Golden Age” science fiction, the figure of the excluded and racialised other had nonetheless been insidiously included: the other had just been sanitised as metallic robota, “their” troublesome attributes of consciousness and demand for “human rights” quietly erased through

22. Saturnalian Pharaohs can be poets too.

23. For a critical reading of race in *Star Trek*, see Bernardi (1998). Retroactive critiques of tokenism aside, the impact of Uhura cannot be underestimated; astronaut Mae Carol Jemison credits Nichelle Nichols' character for inspiring her to join NASA.

deferential reprogramming. Isaac Asimov's Three Laws of Robotics that command the preservation of humans — first introduced in the short story "Runaround" in 1942 — are equally at home on an antebellum plantation as on 22nd century Mars.²⁴

The similitude of future robotica to past slavery — or of a future dystopia to its past "hells on earth" — is not lost on Afrofuturist authors such as Octavia Butler, who in *Kindred* (1979) deployed the sci-fi device of time-travel to revisit southern plantation slavery. We might interpret such a literary device as precisely chronopolitical. Monáe's androidal incarnation as Cindi Mayweather likewise conducts an Afrofuturist chronopolitics; we are reminded again that in the invention of the future, it is the manufacture of the past that takes its form in the uncanny return of the repressed. The android, in this respect, marks the uncanny incarnate, as a robot made to look *as if* human — a point not lost on Fritz Lang.

Afrofuturist interventions in chronology hold a purpose. By imagining alternate futures — a process that requires a simultaneous revisioning of the past, but also its unconscious return — the coordinates of the present are shifted. New and hitherto impossible realities come into effect that return the repressed cycles of past irrealities. Ra's Afrofuturist take on Kemet, for example, sidesteps the claims of truth and authenticity argued for by Afrocentric revisionist history, pursuing instead what we have introduced as MythScience, or the impossible embodiment of "a living parable/parallel", an "AlterDestiny" that uses creative fictions of past and future to reorganise the present coordinates of fact so that he, himself, may walk Earth as a Living Myth. Ra meditates upon rendering the "impossible" a reality:

24. Which isn't to say that Karel Čapek and Asimov weren't cognisant of the (strategic) "allegorisation" of the robot to the subaltern — as in Lang's *Metropolis*, or Marx's proletariat, sf engages in strategic essentialism of the unrepresentable. Hence Asimov's rules:

A robot may not injure a human being or, through inaction, allow a human being to come to harm.

A robot must obey the orders given to it by human beings, except where such orders would conflict with the First Law.

A robot must protect its own existence as long as such protection does not conflict with the First or Second Law.

Wisdom on its abstract planes
Uses myth as medium to understanding
Thus a living parable to the outward
or inward truth
Is every myth:
And from the myth you can see
the likeness of the truth-out
— Sun Ra, excerpt of “Living Parallel (1972)” (2005a: 69)

The Messenger Returns

So far, celebrants and critics of those [Afrofuturological] cultures have had to consider the power of meaningful sound before they could move toward the different and perhaps less demanding tasks involved in analyzing the visualization of the extraterrestrial and the futuristic in racialised forms (Gilroy 2004: 342).

Techno thunders from the speaker stacks. Symbols of outer space and alien contact abound (see fig. 3). Mills is piloting his project entitled *The Messenger / Sleeper Wakes* (2012), the liner notes of which read: “The Sleeper explores time and the absence of it, the method of creating music for a specific time in our future, the preparation and calculation of what could and will be and most importantly, what we do with this sensitive and rare opportunity”. Mills is preoccupied with the future, with time, and unfolding music that will accelerate what he sees as its “cyclical” effects. In his *Star People* performance text (2013), Mills emphasises the persistent unfolding of change, in which “there must always be destruction of the old to bring forth the new”. Yet such destructions are in themselves not new: there is a

“compulsive” history of erasure. Perhaps thusly, he states: “Cycles in our evolution are compulsive, never-ending and guarded by the nomadic reasoning that we live for today, but we dream for tomorrow”.

Throughout his twenty-five odd years of techno production and DJing, Mills has consistently pursued the concept of cyclical change, a concept that techno music shapes into aesthetic discipline through its compositional focus on mechanical, industrial, and otherwise alien forms of sonic repetition in electronic music. Unlike lyrical music, techno presents added challenges for scholars. Its music must be approached on at least two registers: that of its affect (the embodied impact of its soundwaves on the dancefloor) and that of what Eshun calls its “sonic fictions” (1999), the textual, visual, and conceptual productions that surround, but also inflect, its recording and performance: its *Weltanschauung*.

Operating in the register of affect, the signature style of Mills’ techno — marked by its tight, four-bar loops, accented with polyrhythmic percussion and the force of its synthesizers, whether exploring realms of pounding distortion, sci-fi soundtracks, or Africanist and Latin patterning — always sounds as if it is but an echo of a future music to-come. Yet once caught in its vortex, a body bound to the speaker stacks, Mills warps the experience of time, and all feels timeless: hours are spent on the dancefloor as if abducted to the moment of an ever-repeating, ever-unfolding cycle of what Amiri Baraka once called “the changing same”.



Figure 3. Jeff Mills, *Sleeper Wakes*, MUTEK 2012, Montréal. Photo: author.

Then there are the sonic fictions of Jeff Mills, AXIS Records and Underground Resistance. On the Sleeperwakes.com website, Mills' first entry is a report from his travels to Mercury, where he observes "*that the Planet does exercise a earthlike character in terms of its liquid deposits*" (2009). He goes on to write: "*I'm not sure I'm the same person I was then after witnessing such a array of occurances in my travels [sic]*". Apparently, Mills has *become* the Messenger, the last surviving member of a future Earth "terraformed" by invading aliens. Mills' MythScience is tragic, but parallels that of Sun Ra's unheeded warnings in *Space Is the Place* (1974): ignoring the Messenger's time-travel reports, which are communicated through the cycles of techno music, the entire human "race" has fallen prey to an alien lifeform that harvests dreams. As the Messenger, Mills is *already from the future's past*, having returned to the present cycle to warn an even *earlier* Earth of the impending catastrophe that has befallen the *later* Earth who did not heed the warnings. The Messenger is a time traveller, a technochronoprophet, who travels back and forth in time not just once, but twice through two cycles. The 2012 release of *The Messenger* explains the doomsday scenario, its liner notes reading:

The Messenger is the fourth chapter of a musical science fiction series. This chapter explores the recycling of planet Earth and the end of all Earth's life forms. Doomsday appears to be nothing more than an agricultural reconditioning phase controlled by an alien life forms [sic], they reveal the explosive reality of creating the Human animal for the production and harvesting of Dreams. Caught between secretive human+alien relationship, The Messenger pleads the case for more time so that humans can evacuate Earth and save innocent lives — but time has run out.

Mills' written statements identify himself within his Afrofuturist mythsystem: in a reversal of white saviour myths — in particular, the allusions here to *The Matrix* (1999), in which humans are harvested by machines for energy, and *Dark City* (1998), in which humans are harvested in cyclical time for their

souls — Mills *is* the Messenger, and like Will Smith's character Robert Neville in the zombie apocalypse film *I Am Legend* (2007), the last (black) man standing. Mills' personification of a character in his own MythSystem resonates with the Afrofuturist tradition of adopting alien, cyborg, or machinic identities that perform the double task of both allegorising and transforming the embodied performance of blackness. Or rather, surpassing an indeterminate threshold — one signalled in the chronopolitical doubling of the Messenger's time travel — the performance of identity shifts into a *becoming*: an exodus from raciology in which the markers of blackness are no longer determinant nor referential. *One becomes other to or from the other. The "other otherness". Earth is left behind.* I would like to suggest that Afrofuturist becomings provide an escape from the "constraints" of "black community", in which, as Paul Gilroy argues, black artists are confined — in expression but also analysis — to allegorising or representing "race" (1993). Picking up on Balibar's quote above, this is to say that the markers of community stereotype those "within" it; in Gilroy's words, community provides its racialised members with "an imaginative entitlement to elaborate the consciousness of racial adversity while limiting them as artists to the exploration of that adversity" (1993: 182).

Afrofuturism suggests a technology of the self/thing that undertakes a transformative *becoming*. Sun Ra, the ancient black alien deity from Saturn, is perhaps exemplary in this respect, turning to a legal change in name and erasure of his human records in the life-long dedication to becoming alien (see Szwed 1998). Ra exceeds the allegorical role of performative identity: Ra *becomes* the embodiment of the ancient black pharaoh, alien ruler of Kemet. Ra's becoming embodies a chronopolitical gesture that flees Earthly raciology precisely to transform it: to seek an alien alterity to racialised otherness. But if Mills has become "the Messenger" — a designation that likewise has resonance within 20th century

Africentric history, as the title of Elijah Muhammed, founder of the Nation of Islam, Messenger of Allah — who was he before?

Earthly history tells us that Mills is founding member of Detroit techno collective Underground Resistance (UR) with Mad “Mike” Banks in the late 1980s. Formerly known as the Wizard, Mills transformed the mixed-genre scratch-turntablism he pioneered on Detroit radio into a militant and rapid fire style of techno turntablism as one of two UR Assault DJs (the other, Rob Hood).²⁵ Leaving UR in 1992, Mills founded the techno label Axis, developing a minimalist yet polyrhythmic production style that pushed the boundaries of distorted, 4-bar loops, haunting melodies, and industrialist palettes. It was with his sublabel Purpose Maker that Mills gained planetary recognition, incorporating Latin percussion into a repertoire that culminated in the emblematic track “The Bells” (*Kat Moda EP*, 1997). Over the past decade and a half — though audibly since his soundtracking of Fritz Lang’s 1927 film *Metropolis* in 2000²⁶ — Mills has explored ever more science fictional themes in his music productions and visual imagery, returning to Afrofuturist concepts of outerspace realms and alien contact first charted under the X-102 alias with Mad Mike and Rob Hood, who on their celebrated 1992 release, *X-102 Discovers The Rings of Saturn*, combined minimalist acid techno with liquid basslines and “spiritual” synthesizer pads.²⁷ On the rear of the 12-inch sleeve, above a stark image of the outer planet’s rings, the text reads: “Imagine being in an atmosphere where all your God given senses are ineffective, where your existence is a mere fragment in a ring orbiting a planet. You may find yourself caught in the

25. For a more thorough history, see Pope (2011) and Gholz (2011).

26. Which I was fortunate enough to experience at the 10th Anniversary of Sónar festival in Barcelona (2002), where I came across a film installation of Mills’ *Metropolis* soundtrack. Mills’ *Metropolis* is tightly synchronised: as the workers labour repetitiously in the construction of the Ziggurat, so do Mills’ industrialist loops. Both Mills and Monáe are drawn to Lang’s *Metropolis*, for reasons that will have to be considered in greater depth elsewhere.

27. Mad Mike likens the feeling of synthesizer playing to that of playing in church (email to author, 28 May 2008). In 2008 Tresor reissued this classic as *X-102 Rediscovered the Rings of Saturn*.

state between the rotation of motion and the rotation of life circulation”. Caught: captured by sound, abducted into space, and transported to an inhuman plane of existence as inanimate matter drifting among Saturn’s rings — *and* circling high above the birthplace of Sun Ra. Coincidence?²⁸

In Orbit to the Jungle Planet

A substantial aspect to appreciating the affective force of techno is registering the intangible imaginary of its concepts. Mills writes that the concept album should “materialize an idea or theory, to try to explain with music a certain place or a certain thing” (in Eshun 1999: 07[132]). In this respect, Mills’ releases and performances are inscribed with sonic fiction, “the packaging which works by sensation transference from outside to inside”, inclusive of the material, print, and physical wrappers of a record release, from its gatefold images to its liner notes (Eshun 1999: 07[121]). Two new sublabels of Mills’ Axis Records, *Something From The Sky* and *Taken*, feature label imagery from 1950s science fiction films. Stark, black-and-white photographs depict white actors gazing skywards. Frozen in frame, hands shielding their eyes, these archaic symbols of 1950s-era sf gaze out past the black rings of the record, as if symbolically trapped on their small, rotational planet, surrounded by the black rings of the record’s wax. Who or what is this “something in the sky”? Who or what has been “taken”? Who or what has been left behind?

This is not the first time that Mills has drawn attention to the black materiality of the 12-inch record. The record is perhaps the ultimate commodity form in recording music. Increasingly a fetish object

28. Ra is also signified by Monáe, who as Cindi Mayweather, is stalked by black-robed figures with mirrored visages that appear to have followed her from Ra’s film *Space Is The Place* — see the videos (and stage performances) that accompany *The ArchAndroid* (2010), “Dance or Die” Live (2011) and the music video for “Tightrope” (2010).

surpassed by digital forms that promise better fidelity, durability, and portability, its materiality nonetheless ensures its persistence, insofar as its surface offers both the fictitious imprint of sonic authenticity — signaling its sacred role in DJ culture — as well as a precise control surface for turntablists. In its materialisation of the commodity form, the record serves as a “practical allegory” to that of slavery: its default blackness resonates with the reality of enslaved commodification. What I am approaching here is twofold: that the record, as the commodity form *par excellence* in recording music, allegorises the structural position of the slave, as the ultimate commodity form of modernity. This symbolic — which is to say structural — resonance takes place through the record’s material, or one could say, *epidermal* blackness. It is signalled in another way by Grace Jones, who in 1985, and on her album of the same name, announces that we are but “slaves to the rhythm”: slaves to the cycles of the ultimate commodity forms. Such ultimate commodity forms are slaves/records. Thus tinkering with the material concept of the record, and its symbolism, takes on higher stakes than at first envisioned.

Such “tinkering” can also disrupt the record of the body, or rather, how gender is supposed to be played-back: it is 1978, and Grace Jones commands the stage of the Roseland Ballroom in New York City.²⁹ Dressed as a boxer in high heels, Jones shadowpunches the audience, her tall, angular body accentuating her androgyny. Later she appears in black furs; singing in French, in a white sailor’s uniform; and with a live tiger caged on stage, she wears nothing but a revealing, striped catsuit, growling at her four-legged species companion, threatening the racialised tropes that would debase becoming-animal. At the end of the night, dressed as a dominatrix in thigh-high stockings, she calls out white men, handling them deftly with a horsewhip. Jones too exhibits the plasticity of vinyl to challenged recorded

29. See <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N-Ub6gm0JZM>>. Also see Steven Shaviro on Jones’ “Corporate Cannibal” (2014).

tropes.

Records are also, crucially, circular: they rotate. They have rings. They allegorise the very concept of Ra's birthplace, Saturn, and serve as a homage to the concept of Afrofuturism itself. Thus the commodity allegorises the concept. Speaking of *X-102 Discovers The Rings of Saturn*, Mills says that "The label itself is the actual planet, the grooves are the actual rings, so in a certain way you can give the impression that the grooves are the rings of Saturn" (in Eshun 1999: 07[133]). The concept is rendered material in sonic and visual registers: sonic fiction becomes tactile. As Eshun remarks, "the mastering, sequencing and timing of the album, the track, the label, the sleeve, the title: the conceptual potential of each is materialized" (1999: 07[133]). Of course techno music strives to materialise the affective resonances of its science fictional concepts through soundwaves, transmitted at high volume on the dancefloor: the synthetic bleeps and otherworldly rhythms are engineered to transport the dancing body to other worlds through sonic affect alone. The *Afrofuturist* art of techno, however, demands more of its listener than just ecstatic dance. Afrofuturism propagates its *Weltanschauung* through materialised MythSystems, of which Sonic Fiction is a part (Eshun 1999: 07[103]). Through artwork, conceptual performances, and texts, Afrofuturist techno distinguishes its sonic universe from similar but conceptually bereft patterns of club fodder — the latter which Mad Mike calls the "Attack of the Clones".³⁰ Mills' 2013 album, *The Jungle Planet*, is the fifth in his Messenger series (see fig. 4). With each release, Mills has unfolded an extraterrestrial narrative of the eschaton, as the Messenger bears witness to the end of humankind through disastrous first contact with a terraforming alien species. From the AxisRecords.com website, Mills details the discovery of The Jungle Planet:

30. Conversation with author, May 2008.



Figure 4. Jeff Mills, *The Jungle Planet* (2013). Artwork: Julien Pacaud.

After aliens agriculturally recondition Earth and purposely cause the end of the human species, with no home or place he can return to, Earth's only survivor known as The Messenger embarks on a search to find the residue of human dreams in an attempt to re-create his species once again. He desperately travels to a place where the concepts of human animal were designed. A place in another dimension in space to a planet that is beyond belief. A super planet, 300 times the size of Jupiter with three Suns, two solar and one of an unknown source. With four hour days and a near constant cover of darkness, growth is constant. The planet supports trillions upon trillions of life

forms. It was here that the concept of human and life and dreams for commercial reasons was created. In a last ditched effort to restore his race, The Messenger travels to and searches the planet, through its bizarre and obscure landscape with fragile hopes. This planet is called the Jungle Planet.

What is Afrofuturist techno? “Techno is a music based in experimentation; it is music for the future of the human race”, states the Creed of Underground Resistance (UR). Techno is a means of interstellar communication: “alien transmissions from the Red Planet”, as UR’s Martian label declaims. Techno is sonic shock tactics in the language of UR and Mills: “waveform transmissions” and “sonic landmines” designed to smash the “wall between races” erected by the programmers of the “mediocre audio and visual programming that is being fed to the inhabitants of Earth” (Creed).

According to Eshun, the effects of such sonic fictions are powerful: “Concept feeds back into sensation, acting as a subjectivity engine, a machine of subjectivity that peoples the world with audio hallucinations” (1999: 07[121]). The combination of sound+concept, argues Eshun, has the ability to transform subjectivity. The timespace of such an encounter is the dancefloor, where subjects are immersed in auditory stimuli, hallucinating freely. During the dance floor trips, one travels: Afrofuturist techno — like Ra’s “outerspace jazz” — abducts the listener to other worlds. It seduces the dancing body into alien and machinic becomings through sonic fictions that depict its music as transmissions from alien planets or android producers.

Techno: Astrologies of the Streets

Admittedly more abstract than lyric-bound music and its verse-chorus structure, techno abstracts

itself from Earth at greater acceleration. By “abstract”, I mean that techno does not contain vocalisations that signify a referent, undertaking a logic of representation through language. Consequently, techno often deflects or refuses an allegorical role to Earthly concerns. But such “abstraction”, I would argue, heightens the concrete encounter with sonic affect: with no lyricism to interpret, the experience of techno is one of interpreting — through dance — its rhythmic affect to its sonic fictions.³¹ As Eshun writes, “techno disappears from the street, the ghetto and the hood” (1999: 07[102]). The alien and offworld nexus of techno music doesn’t “represent” Earthly concerns, geographies, or identities in the way that gangsta’ hip-hop or West coast g-funk articulates — in a double-movement of critique and fetishisation, celebration and mourning — the violence of impoverishment, the confines of ghettoization, the tropes of masculinist rage and sexism, or the anger and frustration of structural unemployment and systemic discrimination.³² This is not to say that Afrofuturist music — including its hip-hop — turns a blind eye to earthly conditions.³³ Hip-hop in general deploys what Tricia Rose describes as its “primary properties of flow, layering, and rupture [that] simultaneously reflect and contest the social roles open to urban inner-city youths at the end of the twentieth century” (1994: 22). The difference is that Afrofuturist techno defers the contestation of urban paradigms through their (troubled) representation: rather, it seeks exile, inhabiting alternate realities, projecting AlterDestinies, and “representing” an impossible yet enticing unearthly becoming for the abducted: like Ra’s jazz, it “travels the spaceways”. Emcee Killah Priest of Wu-Tang Clan describes the Afrofuturist relationship to the terrestrial ghetto as one of conducting “astrologies of the streets” (“The Pworr (Problem Solver)”,

31. Which is to say, techno is conjunctural: it articulates electronic music with its sonic fictions to produce otherworldly becomings.

32. Tricia Rose details in *Black Noise* how “Hip hop replicates and reimagines the experiences of urban life” (1994: 22).

33. In chapter five, I will turn to RZA and the Wu-Tang Clan’s Shaolin to suggest that hip-hop can deterritorialise the street without necessarily leaving Earth. The idiom “turns a blind eye” means: to ignore undesirable information. I draw its meaning from the apocryphal story of Horatio Nelson, who raising a telescope to his blind eye, said he did not see the Admiral’s flagged orders to withdraw during the 1801 Battle of Copenhagen.

2013). With the lyrics of Priest in mind and, in respect to Mills, the otherworldly rhythms of *The Jungle Planet*, we can imagine how the terrestrial is transformed into an uncanny topography. Mills and Priest elevate the listener to a position where Earth becomes other, as if viewed from orbit, its strange behaviours witnessed with an extra-terrestrial perspective. Through such otherworldly perspectives, Afrofuturist music conducts an *AbWeltanschauung* or *offworlding* of erstwhile humanist approaches. We may imagine how Afrofuturist music *off-worlds* the listener by phase-shifting the mind and body with futurist rhythms and science fictional sounds; rather than becoming grounded in “ghetto life” we are unEarthed from terrestrial points of reference and the grounds of representation. With Afrofuturist sound, we are initiated into the imaginary of an other-space — and space of-the-other-to-enforced-otherness — that seeks (and thus unearths) elsewhere as well as elsewhere.

Star People

If sound is capable of producing hallucinatory effects — including the warped chronopolitical idioms explored above of unEarthing and offworlding — there remains limitations to the visual allegories of sonic fictions. Gilroy broaches such shortfalls when he writes that “seeing and hearing the future need not add up to the same thing” (2004: 342). I would like to draw this missive to a close with a critique of the limitations of Afrofuturism, not in the register of the visual per se, but in respect to *the limits of representation*.

In the context of aesthetic appreciation, an insufficient attempt at visual representation can diminish the impact of sound alone. But visibility can also register the limits of representation by attempting to literalise what is otherwise transformed by way of sound. The same goes for the representative aspects of

text. Such limits were highlighted in a performance by Jeff Mills at the New Forms Festival (2013) in Vancouver, Canada, where Mills debuted his new audiovisual performance, *Star People*. Throughout the three-hour performance, the visuals intermittently superimposed the faces of First Peoples — wearing headdresses and otherwise adorned in “traditional” wear — upon cosmic starscapes (see fig. 5).³⁴

In the *Star People* text, Mills discusses his concept of cyclicity, before writing:

In Indian culture, the consistent belief in the co-habitation of humans and aliens is a relationship that has existed long before their land of America was visited by the Europeans.

The common belief is this: Star people descended from the sky and landed in the mountains around Indian tribes. They became friends and teachers. Children were born from this relationship. At the age of three, these special children were taken up into the Stars to learn. In the later teen years, the children are brought back to Earth by the visitors and reunited with their Indian family. These special people walk the Earth and are among us now.

Jeff Mills presents STAR PEOPLE. A 3 hour musical observation and journey on the relationship between humans and our paternal connection with visitors from the Stars.

34. I use the Canadian designation for indigenous or aboriginal peoples; in the United States the preferred term is Native American, though I believe it remains problematically colonial and nationalist.

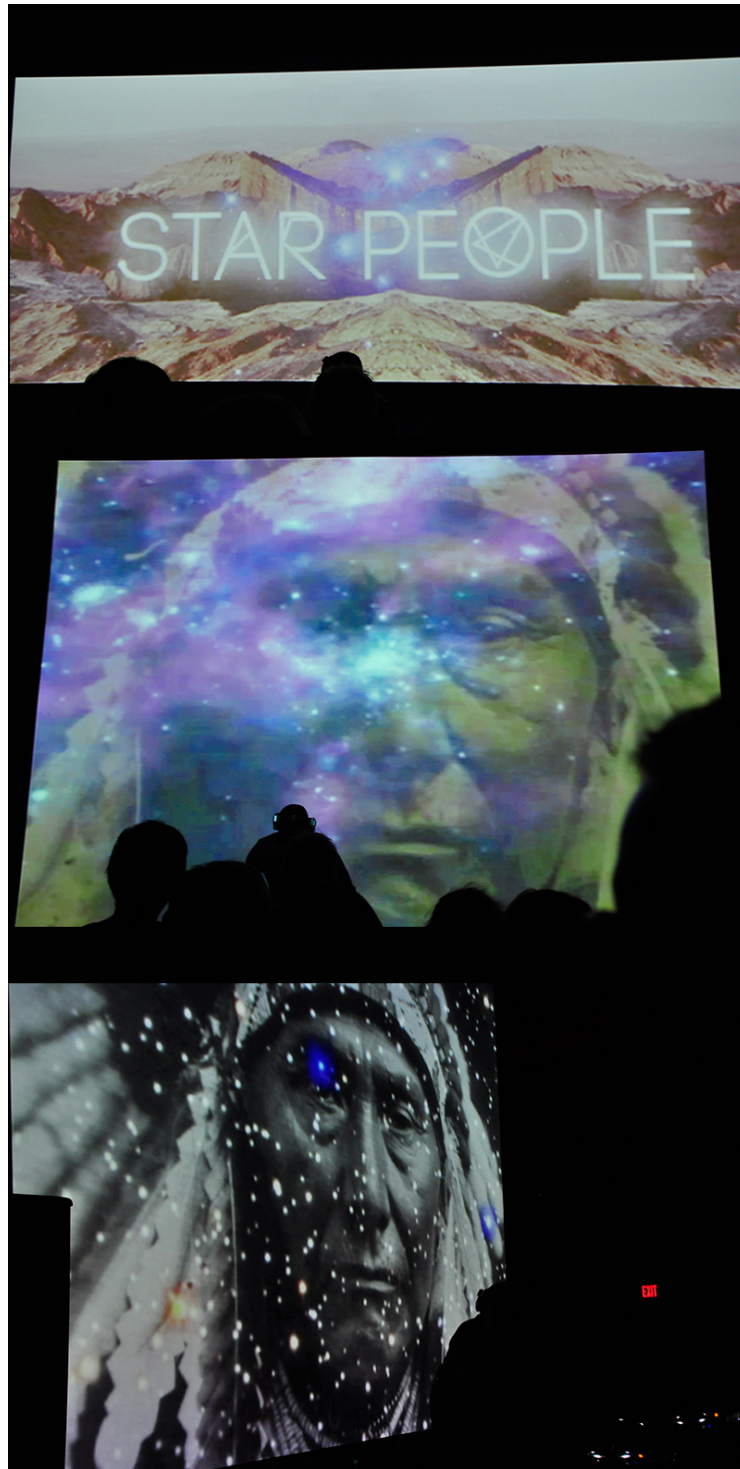


Figure 5. Jeff Mills, *Star People*, Vancouver, Canada (2013). Photo: author.

Mills' text is evidently problematic, not the least its mode of address.³⁵ Though Mills' reference to the Star Peoples parallels various Afrofuturist and populist myths of ancient alien contact, the cumulative effect of the text remains reductive. It generalises multiple peoples and their beliefs, deploying colonial language in doing so. The text risks "othering" these "special people" into an Afrofuturist MythSystem much in the same way that colonialism appropriated the symbols, performances, and cultural signs of First Peoples while, at the same time, tokenising their presence.³⁶ Projected upon the screen, the "Star Peoples" appeared anachronistic — as if "they" live in the past, always in "traditional" costume, and so forth.³⁷ The images failed to intervene, chronopolitically, by representing a futurism otherwise to the "traditionalist" stereotype. The problematic here is compounded by a language of *ownership through the other*: Mills' text claims "*our* paternal connection with visitors from the Stars" (my italics). Besides its sympathetic resonance with Star Peoples, how does Mills' performance differ from appropriations of "Indian tribes" and other such "Cowboys & Indians" stereotypes that often found their way into Golden Era sci-fi?

Interestingly, I was not the only one to take notice. James Bates, Arts Beat reporter of campus and community radio station CiTR 101.9FM, writes that

I was excited to see how the connections between certain aboriginal cultures and alien mythology would play out. This was perhaps the biggest disappointment. Maybe I should have been tipped off by the heavy use of the word "Indian" denoting North American indigenous people in NFF 13's own description. But simply superimposing images of first peoples onto the aforementioned space images does not serve as any substantial comment or exploration of the Afro-futurist ideas

35. A list might include: "Indian culture" as a nonspecific naming of a multiplicity of First Peoples; the collapse of cultural multiplicity into a "common" or "consistent belief;" that "their land" was named "America" pre-contact; the transition from "their" and "they" to the possessives "us" and "our".

36. As well as attempting to systemically erase First People through territorial conquest, colonial war and ghettoization ("reserves").

37. Of note, there was no particular differentiation between the depiction of men and women.

Star People seemed to draw inspiration from (Bates 2013).

Bates goes on to write, “If I had arrived Thursday night prepared to dance, without any expectation of narrative or mythology, I probably would have enjoyed the night a lot more”, suggesting that, on the aesthetic level, he had expected a more cohesive integration of the visual to the sonic registers, precisely *because* of the role Mills’ sonic fiction played in contextualising the performance.³⁸

However, I do not wish to imply that Mills’ choice of representations were distasteful. On the contrary, the photographs were aesthetically stunning portraits. Nor do I think that the concept of creatively exploring First Peoples’ beliefs in alien contact is in-itself at issue; utilising the myth without addressing its living embodiments would only erase First Peoples from the picture. To paraphrase Rey Chow, I too believe that the “mixing of genes and genres” deconstructs raciology (2002: 17). The problem, however, is that the visual representation of Star Peoples, as a literalised allegory of the concept, *was not Afrofuturist enough*: the imagery tried to ground the concept in the authenticity of a racialised/facialised other. The transformative capacity of allegory to exceed Earthly reference was abandoned; instead allegory literalised raciology as if to *authenticate*, through faciality, Mills’ attempt to craft a MythScience from Star Peoples.

38. This criticism was also shared by *Exclaim!* arts critic Alan Ranta (2013).

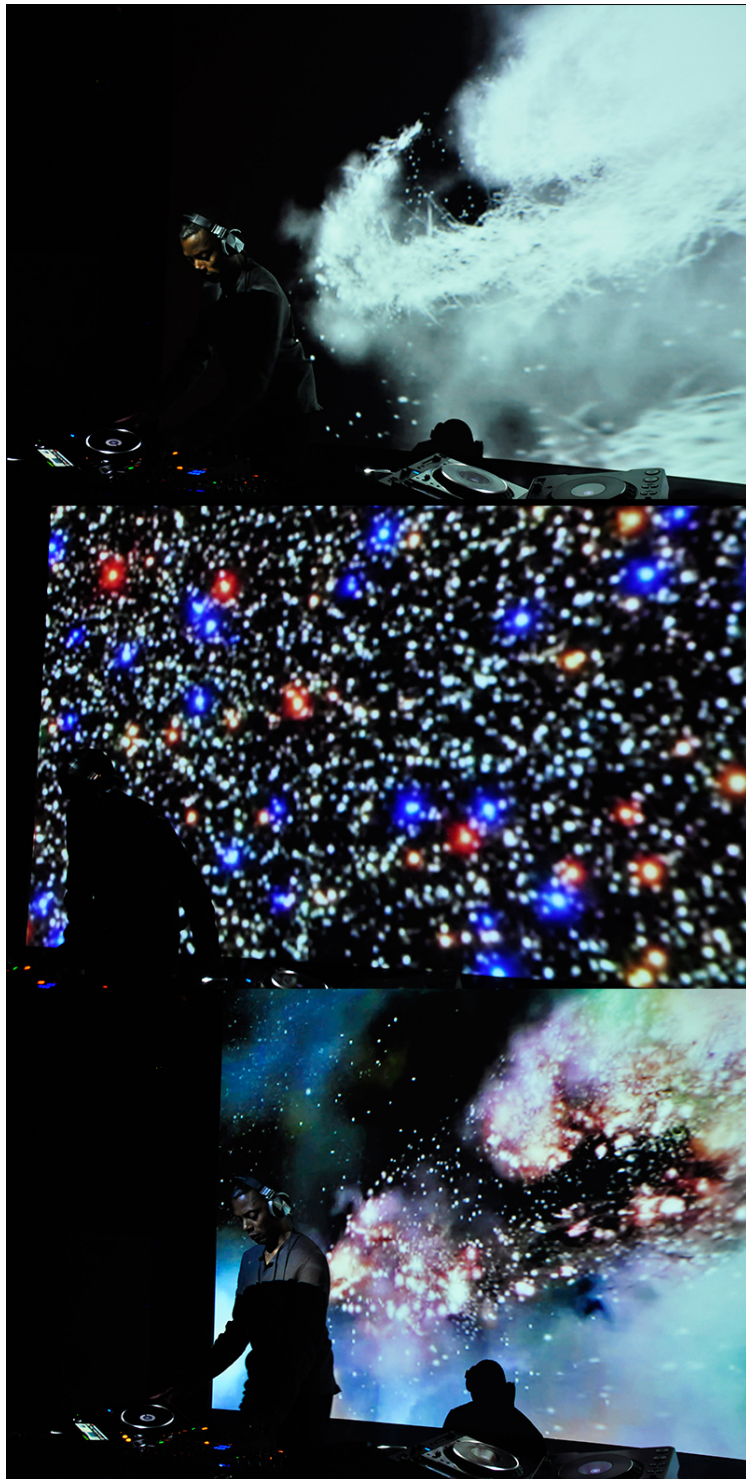


Figure 6. Jeff Mills, *Star People*, Vancouver, Canada (2013). Photo: author.

If I close with this scene, it is not because I harbour a desire to single out Mills' work for critique; it was chance that I attended *Star People* while crafting this text.³⁹ Mills' five-CDJ set was an advanced exploration of offworld techno that left the dancefloor — an eclectic mish-mash of generations, nationalities, genders, and ethnicities — teleported to imaginary realms (see fig. 6). However the performance serves as a means to demonstrate the limits of Afrofuturism by way of its shadow: that Afrofuturism articulates the means to dismantle raciology through operations of becoming and chronopolitics that unearth — or at least render uncanny and ambiguous — representative allegory. And that its escape velocity can fall short if its forces remain grounded in the *literal* limits of representation.

Interplanetary Cosmopolitanism: The Futures of Afrofuturism

Spanning two generations of Afrofuturism,⁴⁰ Jeff Mills and Janelle Monáe signify a planetary counter-tradition whose contours remain to be traced in their emergent complexity. As the likes of Mills and Monáe expand the repertoire of Afrofuturist sounds, signs and strategies, questions and concepts arise that are as singular as they are ancient. What does it mean to be designated an (un)human? What are the techniques of becoming otherwise? What do such becomings mean for “race” and “blackness”?

Though Afrofuturism is in part an inventive countermand to — and thus implicated within — raciology, it differs from strategies that would reify (and celebrate) the latter in (“bio”)cultural forms.⁴¹

39. Unfortunately, Mills was unavailable for interview. As a turntablist myself with nearly every Axis release in my crate, I hold a deep respect for his work (enough to critique it).

40. Mills, born in 1963, is now fifty; Monáe, born in 1985, is twenty-seven.

41. My main point here is to differentiate the trajectory of Afrofuturism from Afrocentrism, even though their history, concepts and

The alien and the android model quasi-autonomous becomings that are constitutively open-ended. These figures also arise from a remix of world cultures. Mills and Monáe have both articulated Afrofuturism's android, alien and machinic becomings to the 20th century European avant-garde as well as science fiction.⁴² Monáe's black-and-white sets and costumes allegorise the epidermal polarisation of raciology to the film stock and *noir* shadowing of Fritz Lang's German Expressionism. Monáe, a third-generation Afrofuturist, is particularly attentive to the ways in which the android speaks to (post)modernist forms of bondage — and autonomy.

Monáe has also set a new standard in reworking the Afrofuturist inheritance. During her performances of "Tightrope", she accepts a cape brought to her on-stage, as if shouldering the mantle of James Brown across generations and genders (see fig. 7). She ends by calling for the break "one more time" — at least five times. Her performances are theatrical set-pieces: her band swings with the precision and orchestrated movement of not only Brown's funk outfits but the big band era of Cab Calloway and Duke Ellington, while their dress, hair and fashion style signify 1960s soul, notably Diana Ross and The Supremes. And like funk, big band, swing — all the "rhythmachines" — both Mills and Monáe⁴³ call upon us to dance, reaffirming the transformational freedom of the ritualistic, embodied movement that makes us all into spastic androids, moonwalkers and aliens.⁴⁴ But how pervasive is the Afrofuturist inheritance in global pop and dance culture? Drawing from the master of anti-gravity ballet and robotic movement himself, the King of Pop, Monáe moonwalks.⁴⁵ Like Michael Jackson, she

persons are constitutively entwined.

42. Which is not to assume that the European avant-garde is solely "white", but rather that Afromodernism has been neglected, as suggested in chapter one (see Nuttall 2006a): the "avant-garde" appropriated (and reworked) abstractionist techniques from the Africanist arts that have in turn influenced Afrodiasporic futurist practices. It is just this constitutive hybridity that Afrofuturism seeks to accentuate — though by ungrounding Eurocentrism. Of note, Mills also turns to pioneering sci-fi writer H.G. Wells, sampling his 1910 dystopian novel title, *Sleeper Wakes* (2009).

43. And Nietzsche. And Emma Goldman — "If I can't dance, I don't want to be part of your revolution".

44. Monáe emphasizes dance throughout her albums, particularly "Tightrope" (*The ArchAndroid*) and "Dance Apocalyptic" (*The Electric Lady*). For a detailed analysis of Mills' desire for a participatory, dancing audience, see Gholz (2011).

dances — and at times sings — like a dysfunctional robot.⁴⁶ Do not these machinic movements, encapsulated in the strange embodiment of Michael Jackson, suggest unexplored Afrofuturist pathways of what it means to become alien?⁴⁷

Jeff Mills, unlike Monáe, works without lyricism and rarely with self-image. Performativity is inherently robotic: on stage, Mills is a composed technician, devoid of expression. His hands move with the grace of a conductor; small, machinic gestures send attentive crowds into rapture. The legacy of Detroit techno is twofold: like Sun Ra's outerspace jazz, it undertakes a sonic exploration of musical boundaries. But also like Ra's monumental performances, it is tied to the ancient ritual of the experiential event, in which one is immersed in cyclic sound and transported through repetition, movement and affect to imaginative offworlds. Techno alienates: it communicates the coordinates of alien and machinic music; it de-humanises the dancing self. While Monáe embodies the alien as Cindi Mayweather, Detroit techno abducts the audience, making its alien arrival a tangible and transformative undertaking.

As Womack has surveyed (2013), in the 21st century artists are organising around the concept of Afrofuturism, transforming its meaning and operations by reinterpreting its past. This past is constitutively intertwined with modernity and the latter's futurological narratives of progress — a teleology that was supposed to leave unhumans behind.

45. And is second-to-none in doing so to the King himself (RIP). See her short film "Many Moons" (2008), where she moonwalks backwards *and forwards*: <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LHgzbzNHVg0c>>.

46. Like a robot gone berserk, perhaps. See Monáe's performance with Nas (2008): <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hAmylsRHWGo>>. At the end of "Many Moons" (2008), Cindi Mayweather dances herself into the sky, defying the bondage of gravity, before she is hit by a sky-born power surge and short-circuits.

47. Might we not speculate upon the epidermal transformation of Michael Jackson as an Afrofuturist attempt to manufacture alien X-humanism? How might whiteness signify not just Caucasian identification, but the android's metallic "chrome"? In Monáe's "Many Moons" (2008), Cindi Mayweather is *initially white*: blackness is applied by pressing a button by her ear. On *The Electric Lady* (2013), DJ Crash-Crash discusses androids "polishing chrome". For a series of (troubled?) ruminations on Jackson, see Fisher (2009).



Figure 7. Janelle Monáe shoulders the cape. Photo: JanelleMonae.com.

Chapter 03

In Advance of the Landing

Long time people used to call dem flying saucer. UFO an' space ship. Dey didn't know then 'bout panspermic dust. Dey never get genetic flashback. Or spend nine nights on de mourning ground. But now we know different, how plenty time them object appear in de sky, was just Daaga and those he led, lost in space, drifting from place to place, still trying find where they come from.
— Anthony Joseph, *The African Origins of UFOs* (2006: 137)

It is not possible to *become* cultured in this culture, if you are *naturally* alien to it.
— Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason* (1999: 12)

The ships landed long ago: they already laid waste whole societies, abducted and genetically altered swathes of citizenry, imposed without surcease their values. Africa and America — and so by extension Europe and Asia — are already in their various ways Alien Nation. No return to normal is possible: what “normal” is there to return to? (Sinker 1992)

In 1992, all but the name of Afrofuturism had been elaborated in a detailed and esoteric — if not philosophical and prescient — article in *WIRE* magazine entitled “Loving the Alien in Advance of the Landing — Black Science Fiction” (Sinker 1992).¹ Though it is Mark Dery who would coin

1. Sinker's article was followed by Mark Dery's edited volume *Flame Wars: The Discourse of Cyberculture* (1994b) and took place concurrently to Greg Tate's investigations of black sf and hip-hop in *The Village Voice* (collected in 1992).

“Afrofuturism” in a roundtable with Tricia Rose, Samuel R. Delany, and Greg Tate in 1993 to name the themes and concerns of twentieth-century African-American speculative fiction, music, comics, film and arts (1994a),² Sinker’s piece is deserving of a speculative exegesis for its attention to the *conceptual* dimensions of the Afrofuturological arts and culture of the black Atlantic.

Sinker was one of the first cultural critics to identify an array of science fictional tropes resonating throughout Afrodiasporic cultural production and practices,³ emphasising the latter’s reconceptualisation of slavery under the science fictional trope of alien abduction, and its decisive outlook: that there is no “normal” to return to, no untainted origin but the “Alien Nation” of post-abduction existence.

What is the meaning of “Alien Nation”? Sinker writes the split sign but once; its meaning is inferred and all but hermetic. My intention below is to tease out the resonances and ramifications of such fragmentary tropes and descriptive signs and to construct a conceptual grammar forged from its works.

Sinker coins “Alien Nation” by creatively extrapolating from the performances and lyrics of hip-hop crew Public Enemy; he develops his points by unfolding the esoteric works of jazz composers Sun Ra and John Coltrane; he connects these fragments to the sounds and styles of musicians Jimi Hendrix and Afrika Bambaataa. As with most creative music writing, Sinker’s text operates *by way of* its esoteria, as if jazz composer Sun Ra’s “relentless” yet “mesmeric” speech, in which Ra narrates a story of his alien

2. An ethnonationalist containerisation that was to continue in Americocentric definitions. Alondra Nelson, for example, re-cites Dery in her introduction to the 2002 issue of *Social Text* on Afrofuturism — “Afrofuturism can be broadly defined as ‘African American voices’ with ‘other stories to tell about culture, technology and things to come’” (2002: 9). Even as Nelson expands the definition’s coordinates to the diaspora, the uncritical deployment of the phrase has erected checkpoints that contain the diasporic complexity of the concept.

3. Though the concept of “Afrodiaspora” is nowhere to be found in Sinker’s article, Gilroy’s elaboration of the black Atlantic cultural network accurately reflects Sinker’s approach to Afrofuturism. The Afrodiaspora traces “lines of affiliation and association which take the idea of the diaspora beyond its symbolic status as the fragmentary opposite of some imputed racial essence”, underlining the “rituals of performance that provide prima facie evidence of linkage between black cultures” (Gilroy 1993: 95, 101).

abduction to the British journalist, cultivates, as it did in Sinker, “the habit of compulsive silence” (1992). This is how one initially encounters Sinker’s text: one listens for all that is elliptical and inferred. And these esoteric ellipses abound: Sinker’s intertextual references to the science fiction (sf) of Samuel R. Delany and Octavia Butler and their “catastrophic worlds”, or to William S. Burrough’s “future-present nightmares”, or its sampling of Afrodiasporic music, remain available only to the initiate: Sinker assumes a sonic repertoire from jazz to hip-hop, funk to techno, just as he assumes literacy of science fiction, cyberpunk, and modernist literature to grasp the artistic and cultural connections that he forges in a brief 2, 415 words.⁴

Sinker’s brevity belies a complexity of thought drawn from Afrofuturist media. My intention here is not to explicate Sinker’s argument per se — as his text is connective and rhizomatic rather than didactic or pedagogical — but to unfold two of his Afrofuturist samples. The first is from Public Enemy: “Armageddon been-in-effect”. The second is of his own coinage: “Alien Nation”. Both concepts address the question of slavery, or rather, the way slavery has been historicised by Afrofuturist operations. The question of slavery is thought in terms of its temporal rupture: that *Armageddon (has) been in effect*. The question of subjectivity is thought in terms of the dehumanisation program of slavery: that Afrodiasporic subjects live in *Alien Nation*. Both concepts address the rupture of slavery, or rather, the way slavery has been reassembled, reinterpreted, and historicised by Afrofuturology. While the Armageddon effect signals the temporal rupture of black Atlantic slavery and its obliteration of a normalised past, the second rupture is that of subjectivity. Since slavery’s dehumanisation program, Afrodiasporic subjects live in Alien Nation.

4. Sinker’s article was followed by Mark Dery’s edited volume *Flame Wars: The Discourse of Cyberculture* (1994b) and took place concurrently to Greg Tate’s investigations of black sf and hip-hop in *The Village Voice* (collected in 1992).

Alien Nation, however, also constitutes an imaginative response to an Armageddon that been in effect, as its offworlding maps out multiple figures of alien subjectivity. While the Afrofuturist identification with the alien is certainly a science fictional trope of otherness, it is also, at the limit, a transformational process, deploying a critical abandonment of the human in the alien becoming of the subject. Thus I will turn to figures of the Afrofuturist alien: the ancient alien deity; the spiritual cosmic messenger; and the electric Afronaut.

If the transformation of the subject is one key aspect of Afrofuturism, intervening in temporality is its *modus operandi*, what I have already described as its “chronopolitics” — its strategy of intervening in the timeline, of manufacturing alternate memories, revisionist pasts, or future chronologies, in short, messing with the temporalities of past and future so as to challenge the coordinates of the present. I will return to chronopolitics as it is elaborated through Sinker’s text.

Rewind to the Afrofuturist Vernacular

I wish to briefly touch upon what Henry Louis Gates, Jr. emphasises as the “black vernacular” of the Afrodiaspora: an ever-developing, inventive and nuanced grammar that is, for example, everywhere heard in the accented flow of the hip-hop emcee. It can also be read — in a site-specific manner — in Afrodiasporic cultural production from literature to performance, including its poetic, theoretical, and philosophical texts.⁵ As an idiom — or rather set of idioms — the black vernacular speaks in multiple inflections. Black vernacular operates as the site of “encoded private yet communal cultural rituals”, a

5. Gates writes: “The methods devised to read these texts are culture-specific and temporal-specific, and they are text-specific as well. We learn to read the text at hand. And texts have a curious habit of generating other texts that resemble themselves” (1988: xxii). Hence the echoes of such others, everywhere.

“parallel discursive universe” to the Western and Eurocentric traditions to which it remains autonomous — and yet of which it is a part (Gates 1988: xix–xxiv). Afrodiasporic texts are both inside and out of the Western tradition; through their vernacular, they enter into a complex negotiation with the heritage of the Western canon as well as the pan-Africanist inheritance and Afrodiasporic invention of myths and tropes.⁶ “Whereas black writers most certainly revise texts in the Western tradition”, writes Gates, “they often seek to do so ‘authentically’, with a black difference, a compelling sense of difference based on the black vernacular” (1988: xxii). Gates argues that the autonomy of the Afrodiasporic text to the Western tradition is structured within this difference, a “two-toned heritage” of Romance languages and their Eurocentric literary themes, on the one channel, and the Afrodiasporic, trickster myths of black vernacular, on the other (1988: xxiii). Thus, such texts signify through a constitutive doubledness, commenting simultaneously on two traditions, each its own multiplicity of differentiated nuances and accents.⁷ The Afrodiasporic text inscribes the many inflections of one tradition into the other, and vice-versa, through a double-voicing that can say two things at once, play concepts of one off the other, and moreover, make a concept say one thing in one tradition, and another to the other.⁸ Including the figure of the Other as such:

Just as the God spoken about in the Black songs is not the same one in the white songs. Though the words might look the same. (They are not even pronounced alike.) But it is a different quality

6. In particular, argues Gates, the trickster figures of Esu-Elegbara and the Signifying Monkey, who symbolise interpretation, troping, meaning, and multiplicity themselves (see 1988: 1–43). I do not have the space here to enter into Gates’ strategic elaboration of “a myth of origins” for black vernacular hermeneutics, or strictly speaking, *Esu-tufunaalo*, a “secular analogue of Ifa divination, the richly lyrical and densely metaphorical system of sacred interpretation that the Yoruba in Nigeria have consulted for centuries” (1988: 9).

7. Gates illustrates this double-voicing by way of Bakhtin, whom he draws upon for the formal outlines of his theory: “the author employs the speech of another, but, in contradistinction to stylization, he introduces into that other speech an intention which is directly opposed to the original one” (in Gates 1988: 110).

8. Gates elaborates the mechanics of this double-voicing — its various tropes, and its function as a meta-trope — in his concept of the meta-trope of *Signifyin(g)*. He draws from Bakhtin to describes how texts perform dialogic and intertextual operations of double-voicing by way of pastiche, parody, and the internal, or hidden, polemic (Gates 1988: 110–11). A note on abandonment: not all abandonments are “successful”, depending upon the framework of adjudication one applies. Lil’ Wayne, for example, despite being a Moon Man, has one foot firmly on the grounds of hip-hop’s heterosexism,

of energy they summon. It is the simple tone of varying evolution by which we distinguish the races. The peoples. The body is directly figured in it. “The life of the organs” (Baraka 1999: 189).

How does one emphasise the particular idiomatic doubling that marks the historical enunciation of the black vernacular text, and at the limit, of the Afrofuturist figure? Rather than displacing or erasing these differences, my gesture here is to amplify their resonances, while contextualising what is at stake in the structural difference of doubling, especially where, among Afrofuturist texts, this doubling proliferates figures that abandon the “authentic” grounds *for blackness*: such are the effects of identifying with, or at the limit, *becoming*, the alien, the cosmic, the cyborg, etc.⁹ It is at this latter point that the “body directly figured in it” takes on its own doubling: black *and* alien, black *and* cyborg, black *and* cosmic. The organs admit prostheses into their innards, feel out alien senses. “The artificial life of the organs”. The becomings and cultural practices of Afrofuturism stretch the limit of blackness beyond its “authentic” moorings in tradition and the epidermalised body in the elaboration of a science fictional vernacular that transforms the articulation of blackness to tropes and practices of technology.

The Afrofuturist encounter: an immersion in esoteria, what Sun Ra calls “the Outer Blackness”. It remains my experience that science-fictional, sonic, and speculative culture is best encountered through immersion: there is no better way to encounter the stranger, uncanny, and alien aspects of Afrofuturist affect. In opening the mind’s *ear* as well as eye to Afrofuturism, my gesture here is to amplify its conceptual volume, to let its interstellar forces reverberate the text, to engender a cosmic event from which an imaginative but critical questioning and a creative and multidimensional thinking-through can take place. There is no simplism, no single thought-problem, no hegemonic discourse from which to

9. The Afrofuturist text, in effect, doubles the doubling: an alter-destiny that attempts to abandon — through an operation of pastiche and parody — both traditions to remake a third enunciation otherwise that, in turn, rewrites the conditions of the “traditional”. This thesis remains in a footnote: the “third space of enunciation” will be developed in a reading of Bhabha in chapter six.

commence Afrofuturism: its study is nascent, hesitant, and scarcely begun. Though its affects, signs, and symbols are near everywhere in the globalisation of Africanist and Afrodiasporic soniccultures,¹⁰ resonant as tropes within black science and speculative fiction, music, film, and art, it is rarely traced nor connected as a gestalt outside of its minoritarian scholarship and disparate studies: for most readers, the name of Afrofuturism remains foreign, even as its artifacts probably are not.¹¹

Armageddon been in effect

Armageddon been in effect. Go get a late pass. Step!

This time around, the revolution will not be televised. Step!

— Professor Griff of Public Enemy in “Countdown to Armageddon” (1988)

The advantage of Science Fiction (Sf) as a point of cultural departure is that it allows for a series of worst-case futures — of hells-on-Earth and being in them — which are woven into every kind of everyday present reality (on a purely technical level, value in Sf is measured against the fictional creation of other worlds, or people, believable no matter how different). The central fact in Black Science Fiction — self-consciously so named or not — is an acknowledgement that Apocalypse

10. I deploy the portmanteau of *sonicculture* to signify all that falls under a “music culture”: a combinatory of cultural practices grouped around an ever-modulating set of musical motifs that nonetheless are headlined by an all-purpose descriptor such as jazz or hip-hop; sonicculture encompasses performance, composition, listening practices (including dancing), and codes of critical appreciation (what constitutes “good” music). The term is inclusive of the music’s production and recording techniques, its distribution networks, preferred avenues of transmission (digital, vinyl, CDs) and experience (concert halls, late-night smoke-filled clubs, raves, but also headphones, etc.). See (van Veen 2010).

11. This particular chapter is best read while listening to its resonances, which also act as the indispensable supplement of sonic counter-realities in which to engage by ear: selections from “alien android” Janelle Monae’s hyperfunk R&B masterpieces *Metropolis* (2007) and *The ArchAndroid* (2010); the apocalyptic sci-fi hip-hop of Public Enemy’s *Apocalypse ’91* (1991); the solaristic jazz of John Coltrane’s *Interstellar Space* (1967/1974); the aquatic electro and offworld techno of Underground Resistance’s *Interstellar Fugitives* (1998); the Kemetian and cosmic jazz of *The Sun Ra Arkestra Meets Salab Ragab In Egypt* (1983); and the offworld slangue hip-hop of RAMM:ΣLL:ZΣΣ’s *This Is What You Made Me* (2003). But for now: like Ralph Ellison’s protagonist of *The Invisible Man* (1947), blast the playlist, *Other Planes of There*, Volumes One and Two, as if under the burning filaments of 1, 369 lightbulbs: “when I have music I want to *feel* its vibration, not only with my ears but with my whole body” (1947: 11).

already happened: that (in Public Enemy's phrase) *Armageddon been in effect*. Black SF writers — Samuel Delany, Octavia Butler — write about worlds after catastrophic disaster; about the modalities of identity without hope of resolution, where race and nation and neighbourhood and family are none of them enough to obviate betrayal (“Every brother ain't a brother cause a colour / Just as well could be undercover” raps Chuck D in “Terrordome”) (Sinker 1992).¹²

Mark Sinker connected the post-apocalyptic and alien tropes of black science fiction to a collage of Afrodiasporic soniccultures — jazz, techno, hip-hop, and electro — that traced the science fictional, speculative, and futurist resonances between disparate constellations of Afrodiasporic aesthetic production, technology, culture, and performativity. Sinker, along with Greg Tate (1992) and David Toop (2000), was one of the first to articulate the common thread of alien, Egyptological and outerspace resonances among Afrodiasporic aesthetics, or “black science fiction”.¹³ In his link-up of black science fictions and Afrodiasporic soniccultures, Sinker mapped the tropes of armageddon and alien abduction as they shaped the shared imaginaries of the dispersed, yet connected cultures of what Paul Gilroy would memorably theorise — in nearly the same year — as the black Atlantic (1993). Sinker observed how a number of Afrodiasporic cultural productions embraced alien, outerspace, and offworld tropes, elaborating “Black Science Fiction”, as he understood it, between multiple forms of media. Central to these science fictional tropes was an account of the Atlantic slave trade, narrativised and reimagined as the armageddon of alien abduction (and I here replay the phrase): “The central fact in Black Science Fiction — self-consciously so named or not”, writes Sinker, “is an acknowledgement that Apocalypse already happened: that (in Public Enemy's phrase) *Armageddon been in effect*” (1992). For Sinker, the very genesis of Afrofuturism develops from the tension that “Armageddon been in effect”.

12. I here resample this quote for instructional purposes.

13. As noted in chapter one, the nascent concept of “Afrofuturism” would arrive with Mark Dery’s roundtable with Trica Rose, Samuel R. Delany, and Greg Tate in 1993.

The Armageddon event is the Atlantic slave trade. Africans are abducted by aliens to a strange land. Everything that follows is played out in a post-apocalyptic dystopia. The phrase “Armageddon been in effect” is taken from “Countdown to Armageddon”, the dystopic, shell-shocked opening to *It Takes A Nation Of Millions To Hold Us Back* (1988). Recorded live at a London BBC Television concert with sirens screaming, Professor Griff unleashes the flow: “Armageddon been in effect. Go get a late pass. Step! / This time around, the revolution will not be televised. Step!”. For Sinker as for Public Enemy, the alien ships had already landed. In the opening to Public Enemy’s “Can’t Truss It” (1991), a collage of samples bombards the listener in a dystopian soundscape. The Armageddon effect is rendered audible through an atmosphere of dread:

It started in slave ships... [record scratch] slave ships. There are more records of slaveships than one would dream... [helicopter buzzes overhead] It seems inconceivable until you effect that for two hundred years ships sailed carrying cargos of slaves... [sound of people screaming] [record scratch: sample Malcolm X] “Be non– non– be nonviolent. In the face of the violence that we’ve been experiencing for the past four hundred years, it’s actually not equal to a disservice, in fact it’s a crime — it’s a crime — [Chuck D]: *HERE COMES THE DRUMS.*
— Public Enemy, “Can’t Truss It”, from *Apocalypse ‘91... The Enemy Strikes Back* (1991)

Armageddon — in the past tense. Professor Griff signifies that with the event of slavery, armageddon has already taken place for Afrodiasporic populations. The timeline is not as it should be. Something awry has taken place: time is (to rephrase Shakespeare’s Hamlet) “out of joint”. The Apocalypse has already happened: its effects have *been*, past tense. Everything else that follows is but an *effect* of armageddon. We live in a post-apocalyptic future; this future is but an *Armageddon-effect*. Consequently, everyone else, audience included, needs to go to school — in short: to get schooled. The

rest of us — those unschooled in the Afrodiasporic apocalyptic experience of the armageddon-effect — are all late to the effects of armageddon, though we live its effects (blindly). Catch up to the future that has been. Go get a late pass.¹⁴

This time around, the revolution will not be televised. The 1960s protest slogan was put to poetic use by Gil-Scott Heron of the Last Poets; it first appeared on the 1970 album *Small Talk at 125th and Lenox*. The Last Poets are widely regarded as the precursors to hip-hop, combining poetic flow with percussion and rhythmic accompaniment (see Baraka 1999). Griff's citation links Public Enemy to the Last Poets, hip-hop to the '60s Black Arts Movement.¹⁵ Scott-Heron's delivery of his poetic flow underscores his use of repetition in the poem's construction. In his best live recordings, he slows the tempo down, throwing out each phrase, pausing for effect. In the break, between phrases, the audience calls back. "The revolution will not be televised" is structured as a series of negations: the revolution will *not* appear on television, *nor* appear alongside advertising, *nor* appear to be selling products of any kind: "The revolution will not be brought to you / by Xerox in four parts without commercial / interruption", says Scott-Heron (2000: 77). The revolution will not be televised, says Scott-Heron, because there will be no audience to watch television: *you will become the revolution*. The poem's opening line affirms the revolutionary subject of history by removing the audience from the Nielsen ratings: "You will not be

14. In interpreting the *flow* of the hip-hop emcee, we are reminded of Tricia Rose's analysis that "rap music is, in many ways, a hidden transcript. Among other things, it uses cloaked speech and disguised cultural codes to comment on and challenge aspects of current power inequalities"; particularly in the case of Public Enemy, hip-hop is "engaged in symbolic and ideological warfare with institutions and groups that symbolically, ideologically, and materially oppress African Americans" (1994: 100-01). And in this case: with the timeline itself, with history as a mutable object, including its past revolutions and insurgencies. (Rose is here evidently echoing aspects of Gates's thesis of *Signifyin'* — see footnotes above, and (Gates 1988).)

15. Scott-Heron has likewise been sampled in house music with the percussive, deep minimalist jam, "The Revolution Will Not Be Televised (Lunar Disco Mix)" by the Soul Rebels (Defected 067, 1999). The track samples from a live performance of the poem, including its preamble and the audience's cheering and clapping. Scott-Heron's voice has been electronically processed, resulting in a transient pitching of its harmonic components, not quite roboticised, but not quite human, either. What are the effects of rendering quasi-machinic a classic black power poem? Weheliye argues that such electronic techniques "reconstruct the black voice in relation to information technologies", thereby historicising the enunciation of "soul" through technology (2002: 10, 33). I agree, but would extend Weheliye's argument, that (a) the inflections to "soul" are transformed in the process, and that (b) "soul" is not just contained to the construct of the human, but an effect — affect — of the machine. (This discussion will have to be further elaborated at another place and time.)

able to stay at home, brother. / You will not be able to plug in, turn on and cop / out”. And it ends by underscoring the *subject* of revolution: “The revolution *will* put you in the driver’s seat”; “The revolution will be no re-run, brothers. / The revolution will be LIVE” (2000: 79). In an interview with PBS Television in the 1990s, Scott-Heron explains how the poem’s catchphrase was meant to reinforce the transformative aspect of revolutionary subjectivity:

Well you know, the catchphrase, what that was all about, “the revolution will not be televised”, that was about the first change that takes place is in your mind. You have to change your mind before you change the way you livin’ and the way you move. So when we said that “the revolution will not be televised”, we were saying that the thing is going to change people. There’s something that no one will ever be able to capture on film. It will be something that you see and all of a sudden you realise, I’m on the wrong page. Or I’m on the right page, but on the wrong note. And I’ve got to get in sync with everyone else to understand what’s happening with this country.¹⁶

Griff’s rephrasing implicitly states, however, that the revolution *was* televised — the “first time around”. Despite Scott-Heron’s emphasis on the intangibility of revolutionary change *in* the subject (in a sense, Scott-Heron’s poem addresses the ‘60s mantra that “the personal is political”), Griff underscores the poem’s paradox: that though revolution transforms the subject in imperceptible ways, once the subject acts — in protest, riot, court challenge — the subject is televised regardless, caught up within the complex media apparatuses of representation. Griff’s announcement that “this time around it won’t be” — as Watts, Chicago, and the burning summers of the ‘60s were heavily televised — suggests two

16. “Race and Racism — Red, White, and Black”, Episode 306 of *The ‘90s*, PBS Television, KBDI. Produced by Tom Weinberg and Joel Cohen, 4/19/91. Archived at: <<http://mediaburn.org/video/the-90s-episode-306-race-and-racism-red-white-and-black/>>. This episode is well worth viewing as an incredible piece of independent television. It begins with a white metalhead defining “a black person” vs. a “nigger”. Its subjects include the Klu Klux Klan (during which the producers scroll a sickening list of KKK attacks across the bottom of the screen), Mandela and apartheid in South Africa, the Mohawk Warriors of the Oka Crisis, the Black Panthers and COINTELPRO, and the framing of Panther Dhoruba al-Mujahid bin Wahad. The producers also interview numerous scholars who discuss capitalism as the structural cause of racism.

readings: that either no unmediated revolutionary act (or subject) is possible or that televisualisation will likewise be revolutionised, which is to say, negated as an act of creative destruction, in the revolutionary moment. Black out the networks.

Ambiguity and uncertainty over the effects of representation haunt Griff's phrase. Just as the symbols of black nationalism are recontextualised by Public Enemy in their lyrics, videos, and imagery — the raised fist of black power, samples of Malcolm X, phrases from the Nation of Islam, the Security of the First World (S1W) dancers dressed like Black Panthers — Public Enemy likewise repositions Nationtime within hip-hop, and hip-hop within a mediatised environment, suggesting that the televisual apparatus identified by Scott-Heron can be "revolutionised" by depicting what a future revolution might look like.

This time around, implies Griff, it's Public Enemy who are revolutionising the content of television, producing and creating archetypes and symbols of self-representation, in which the revolution becomes embedded in hip-hop, visualised and rendered rhythmic in the format of a music video. PE's ambiguity over revolutionary televisualisation treads the line between advocating revolution and exploring its possible representation. The 1989 video for Public Enemy's "Fight The Power" appears to stage the question: "what would revolt look like today?" — a question that manifested itself in the wake of the 1992 Los Angeles South Central riots, a six-day uprising that exploded after a trial court acquitted four police officers of the beating of Rodney King. Commissioned by Spike Lee as the anthem for his film *Do The Right Thing* (1989), the video for "Fight the Power" suggests an alternate course of action, in which the Brooklyn-filmed block party — held in Bed-Stuy, no less — blends dance party and street protest into a carnivalesque atmosphere of insurgent politics.¹⁷ In a powerful essay for *Salon.com*, Laura K.

Warrall argues that

‘Fight the Power’ pushed audiences to question authority, and said what we were too afraid to say about American society. The song came at a time when young people, who were being cast aside as gangstas or slackers, were hungry for meaning and connection. Not since the idealized ’60s had there been such a force in music toward action. Music fans were reminded of their political strength and their right to defy the establishment. When Public Enemy called us to battle, it revived the notion that it just might be possible to fight the system. At the very least, we knew it was necessary (Warrall 2002).

Of course, the consumer cycle does not end here, and the process of capture by which such edgy representations are again recycled into marketing and consumer capitalism have become staples of the latter.¹⁸ By this I mean not only the commodification of hip-hop, but the mediatization of revolt. Beginning with the amateur video that captured the beating of Rodney King, and CNN’s invention of the 24-hour news cycle during the Gulf War, the advent of mobile recording and broadcast devices and digital telecommunications create an even more complex interrelationship wherein advertisers and broadcast corporations alike profit from the amateur production and consumption of revolt, violence, and military operations.¹⁹ Identifying modes of “resistance” to representation has likewise revealed its

17. Apparently the filming of the video (directed by Spike Lee) nearly transformed into what it sought to represent (see Chang 2005: 280; see Myrie 2009: 169). It is unclear whether the police filing by at 5:15 are actors (by the look on Chuck D’s face, probably not), and the closing two minutes of the video depict this undecidability between revolt and staged film set, from the call-and-response crowd chants of “Don’t Believe The Hype” with Flavor Flav to an increasingly energetic street march. It is just this line that Public Enemy plays, as its S1W dancers bust moves underneath portraits of Louis Farrakhan. The video also predates the “carnival against capitalism” and other such actions by London-based Reclaim The Streets (RTS) in which soundsystems and electronic music from hip-hop to techno combined to create an alternative form of political agency that blended protest and occupation with circus, celebration, and electronic dance music culture.

18. In a way somewhat dismissive of efforts to revitalise hip-hop’s political force — such as Dead Prez and Kanye West — as well as ignoring the fragmentation of nearly all “mainstream” broadcast models, Warrall nonetheless convincingly writes that “we’re even more inundated with commercialism and the market’s skewed view of what’s controversial. ‘Urban’ culture has become a trend factory, and hip-hop’s dependence on faux shock has reduced the complexity of the art form. Rebellion has been commodified, a fact that is perfectly illustrated by the proliferation of rap stars’ clothing labels. Dissent itself has become unthreatening” (2002).

19. This point was highlighted during the Gulf War, during which CNN created the format of the 24-hour news cycle and its streaming broadcast of “real time” television. These events prompted Baudrillard to pen his infamously controversial series of three articles (published in 1991 before, during, and after the Gulf War), collected under the title *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place* (1995). Baudrillard’s polemic was squarely aimed at demonstrating how actual revolutionary events had fallen entirely into spectacle.

inadequacy when facing the complexities of capitalist appropriation. The moral outrages over the explosion of “gangsta” but also the militancy of “conscious” hip-hop in the late ‘80s and early ‘90s — with Public Enemy, along with N.W.A., Wu-Tang Clan, Eric B. & Rakim, etc. at the forefront — have long since receded, precisely because mainstream hip-hop has been codified into established traits of misogyny, sexism, and black-on-black violence that remains comfortably ensconced within the narrative of consumer capitalism.²⁰ As Asante, Jr. writes:

Although hip hop was founded on the principles of rebellion, over the past decade [2000–] it has been lulled into being a conservative instrument, promoting nothing new or remotely challenging to mainstream cultural ideology. Even in the midst of an illegitimate war in Iraq, rap music remains a stationary vehicle blaring redundant, glossy messages of violence without consequence, misogyny, and conspicuous consumption. As a result, it has betrayed the very people it is supposed to represent; it has betrayed itself (Asante 2008: 10).

There are, of course, counterexamples to such betrayal, and Asante Jr. focuses upon recovering and exploring these alternative avenues — as does Afrofuturism, an oft-neglected component of hip-hop’s political and revolutionary imaginary. But rather than pursuing the critique of appropriation, authenticity, and representation — whose cycles are well worn — I wish to return to Public Enemy’s focus on *why* the problematic of representation and its circuit of commodification continue to undermine efforts of sociopolitical and economic change (or, more militantly, revolutionary agency). By juxtaposing “Armageddon been in effect” with a clarification of Scott-Heron’s phrase — *this time* the revolution will not be televised — Public Enemy demonstrate how the former affects the conditions of the latter. The “Armageddon effect” signifies the persistent effects of slavery in rendering contemporary

20. M.K. Asante, Jr.’s book *It’s Bigger Than Hip-Hop: The Rise of the Post-Hip-Hop Generation* lays out this deadlock of politico-cultural representation, wherein “hip hop’s dive into the mainstream was a win for the handful of corporations and artists who grew rich, but a significant loss for those who it is supposed to represent” (2008: 3).

conditions dystopic. But what are these persistent effects? The “Armageddon effect” suggests a rather more pernicious effect of slavery: the commodification of black revolutionary cultures through the media apparatus of representation. James Baldwin summarises this condition: “Now, as then, we find ourselves bound, first without, then within, by the nature of our categorizations” (in Asante 2008: 1).

We may now summarise “Armageddon been in effect” as follows: Public Enemy’s flow depicts how absolute commodification began with the slave ships; Scott-Heron suggests that it continues through televisual mediatization and consumer capitalism; Public Enemy show how even Scott-Heron’s poetic calls for revolution, as well as their own production of politicised and Afrofuturist hip-hop, remain paradoxically caught in the very Armageddon effect they dramatise. Public Enemy’s self-reflexive performance of this paradox suggests that it is only through this dramatisation, which is to say, embrace of television and consumerised means of communication, that the Armageddon effect can be countered. Public Enemy attempt to crack the facade of media control by altering its contents.

Returning to Baucom (2005) in the last chapter, I wish to here recall that slavery is the ultimate commodification of living labour: the enslaved “subject \$” is the first modern. The Armageddon effect attempts to situate, in its phrasing and performance, how the apparatus of “slavery \$” — the general structure of producing “subject \$” — has persisted through the process of commodification itself, a process of commodification that began with the commodifying of (a) “race”.

The mediatised era that renders revolution as televisual spectatorship is *also* an effect of the system of absolute commodification that turns all that is solid into spectacle. Media is consumed. In Professor Griff’s brief two phrases, Public Enemy connect slavery to the commodification of (black) revolutionary culture, while self-reflexively demonstrating, through the resampling of Scott-Heron, how the

Armageddon effect undermines, in advance, the place of a non-mediatised outside to revolutionary activity. Public Enemy suggest — or rather self-reflexively perform — that it will only be through television, or rather through the Armageddon effect at large that the latter's forces can be countered. This self-reflexive position echoes Gates, Jr.'s analysis of the black vernacular: Public Enemy utilise the idiom of television to speak otherwise; they utilise the media of the Armageddon effect to battle through the Armageddon effect. The underlying force to be combatted remains that of the slavery system \$.

Blackskins: Robot Race

Slavery is perhaps the most important sf theme of all time. Something like human slavery is explicit in many classic sf texts, from Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) to Isaac Asimov's *I, Robot* (1950), from *Metropolis* (1927) to *Forbidden Planet* (1956) to *Blade Runner* (1982). As an sf theme, *robot* slavery — redundant, given the word's root in *forced labor* — is usually but not always transparently readable as *race* slavery (LaBare 2014).

As Kodwo Eshun outlines in “Motion Capture”, the interview that bookends his evocative exploration of Afrofuturist soniccultures, *More Brilliant Than The Sun: Adventures in Sonic Fiction* (1999), “Mark [Sinker] made the correlation between *Blade Runner* and slavery, between the ideas of alien abduction and the real events of slavery” (1999: A[175]).²¹ As I argue above, Sinker's reading of “armageddon been in effect” emphasises that the End Times occur in the past tense: the slaveships beached upon the shores of the “dark continent”, unloading an arsenal of cultural, economic, and

21. It's worth noting that nowhere does Sinker mention Ridley Scott's 1982 film *Blade Runner*; the connection is Eshun's. However the underlying motif is clear: Sinker connected the alien-android motifs of Afrofuturism, of creative explorations of nonhuman subjectivity, to the historical dehumanisation produced by slavery.

epistemic destruction: what Marx called the “primitive accumulation” of forced slavery. As Marx writes in volume one of *Capital*, along with the conquering of the Americas and India, including “the extirpation, enslavement, and entombment in mines of the indigenous population [of the Americas] . . . the conversion of Africa into a preserve for the commercial hunting of blackskins, are all things which characterize the dawn of the era of capitalist production” (1990: 915). Marx’s use of “blackskins” — as if Africans were the trade equivalent of Canadian beaver pelts in the establishment of economic and territorial dominion — signifies the *ontological* conversion already in effect.²² The blackskin is living monetary value. The blackskin marks not a human, but a living product to be commercially hunted.²³ By raising the question of ontology, I wish to underscore how slavery converted the “human being” to a strictly monetary sign (I keep “human being” in quotation marks: in chapters four and five, I will seek to demonstrate how the “human” is only defined in relation to its unhuman other, the slave). Viewed from the vantage of human exceptionalism, slavery attempts to obliterate the ontological capacity of human subjectivity: that the human being, exceptional among all other species, is a unique entity irreducible to exchange value. Yet, such absolute commodification is at the very core of slavery. Under such logic (and law), slaves are not humans; they are private property.²⁴ The labouring body becomes absolute property, pure finance, what Baucom describes as the “suffering human body incessantly attended by an equal sign and a monetary equivalent” (2005: 7).²⁵ This is not to say that the obliteration of a subject’s “humanity”

22. In Akiva Schaffer’s film *The Watch* (2012), in which four men band together in a neighbourhood watch only to fend off an alien invasion, the “blackskin” is literally embodied in the character of Jamarcus (Richard Ayoade). Jamarcus is revealed to be an alien wearing the skin of a deceased black man (and whose actual person/body is never dealt with). A running gag in the film concerns the superficiality of Evan’s (Ben Stiller) “multicultural friendships” with people of non-white ethnicities. The film’s brilliance lies in the self-reflexivity of this searingly critical gag that comes to be embodied in Jamarcus (in this 99%-white town of middle-America, even the black guy isn’t black, nor is he a black alien: he’s an alien wearing blackskin: for this alone I refuse IMDB.com’s rating of 5.6 stars and give it a 9).

23. This (de)valuation also reflects upon the ways in which the animal is categorised as nothing other than resource property in Marx’s analysis (even if cynically).

24. This argument also goes for the (ongoing) patriarchal violence that treats women as private property. It also extends to the treatment of animals, and life as such, including the Earth, as nothing but privatised property ripe for exploitation and profit.

25. In this respect, we can engage with a little Lacanian play: from subject to object, the African subject $S = \$$.

was complete.²⁶ It would appear that despite systemic violence, the plasticity of “human” ontology — or rather, from an Afrofuturist perspective, how *becoming* reveals the “human” as but one particular modality, a Living Myth that attempts to usurp all others as the “master race” — offers means of escape, exodus, and resistance. Uncovered histories of Civil War-era slave rebellions, for example, attest to this capacity to revolt even under the most dire circumstances (see Hahn 2009; Hart 2002; Higginson 1998). Nonetheless, slavery by its very nature strives to displace even the very memory of “being human”. Such is the *de jure* principle of instituting slavery; that the slave is not a human subject. The violence of enslavement sought to erase the past, its rituals, religions, and languages, so as to remake living labour, the subject \$, without memory or attachment. Public Enemy’s dystopian soundscapes strive to imagine the trauma of the Middle Passage. Whether the individuated condition of slavery was a result of war, kidnapping, or unfortunate birth, once unloaded in the New World the “cargo” were accounted for, numbered, shackled and sold as commodities, their names and identities stripped, their cultures, histories and languages (all but) banished.²⁷ With the genesis of the Atlantic slave trade in the 16th century, what had yet to emerge as industrial capitalism had nonetheless already achieved the ultimate commodification of labour.

Is it possible to imagine the long 16th to 19th centuries of the Atlantic slave trade (*Maafa*, or “Great Disaster” in Swahili), *without* taking into account the destruction wrought upon the ontological certitude of being *human*? For it is with this question, itself an effect of prolonged dehumanisation — a question that assumes the positive valence of humanism, of an essential human “kernel”, as it were, to

26. Gates, Jr. argues precisely for the transmission of various pan-African cultural narratives, in song and ritual, down through slavery (see 1988).

27. Which is not to say, as Sinker emphasizes, that humans forcibly thrown into slavery were not struggling to retain all that was in the process of being erased: “part of the story of black music (the affirmative, soul-gospel aspect) has always been this — that losing everything except basic dignity and decency is potentially a survivable disaster” (1992).

the dehumanised slave — that the Afrofuturist undoing of slave consciousness commences: what worth is there in what Eshun calls the “pointless and treacherous category” of the human when the “real conditions of existential homelessness, alienation, dislocation, and dehumanisation” have forever rendered modernity and its Enlightenment project suspect? (1999: 00[-005]; 2003: 288). The stakes of this question are outlined by Eshun as well as novelist Toni Morrison:

In an interview with critic Paul Gilroy in his 1991 anthology *Small Acts*, novelist Toni Morrison argued that the African subjects that experienced capture, theft, abduction, mutilation, and slavery were the first moderns. They underwent real conditions of existential homelessness, alienation, dislocation, and dehumanisation that philosophers like Nietzsche would later define as quintessentially modern. Instead of civilizing African subjects, the forced dislocation and commodification that constituted the Middle Passage meant that modernity was rendered forever suspect (Eshun 2003: 288).

What avenues of available existence are there if modernity is forever rendered suspect? How does one respond when faced with one-size-fits-all Enlightenment humanism that excludes some others — as dehumanised slaves — to improve the conditions of those “real” humans? If there is no “normal” to return to, what options are left? Where does one go, and what does one become, if the subjectivities available all lead towards the very system that instituted slavery?

Encounters with Alien Nation

... the planet, already turned Black, must embrace rather than resist this: that back-to-nature pastoralism is intrinsically reactionary, that only ways of technological interaction inherited from the jazz and now the rap avant garde can reintegrate humanity with the runaway machine age

(Sinker 1992).

The figure of the alien is pivotal to Afrofuturism: it is the point at which Afrofuturism articulates its imaginaries to an embodiment in the subject. In what follows I will outline three alien embodiments: the ancient alien deity (Sun Ra); the cosmic messenger (John Coltrane); and the electric Afronaut (Jimi Hendrix). There is no better place to begin than with “Egyptian deity, cosmic explorer [and] mystic messenger” Sun Ra, otherwise known as the bandleader of the “Myth-Science Arkestra”, prolific jazz composer, avant-gardist keyboardist, pamphleteer, and philosopher poet. I have discussed Ra previously, will do so here, and will do so again in chapter six. Ra is a pivotal figure. We encounter Ra as he is narrating his abduction by outer-space aliens — with red glowing eyes and antennas — to Mark Sinker.

The ancient alien deity. “I went up at terrific speed to another dimension, another planet”, says Ra to the British journalist, the latter self-describing his 1989 Philadelphia encounter with Ra as “a middle-class English kid, self-defrocked punk rocker” meeting the “prophet of a space between worlds in collision”, now “in his mid '70s . . . his touchstones '40s pulp SF, '30s big band music, '20s conspiracy-theory pseudo-Egyptology” (2014). Replying over the course of two hours to Sinker — who had asked him what the link was between music and magic — Ra continues: “Anyway, they talked to me about this planet, and the way it was headed and what was going to happen to teenagers, and governments, and people. They said they wanted me to talk to them. And I said I wasn't interested” (Ra, in Sinker 1992). In his 1992 article, Sinker elicits little surprise at Ra's disinterest — because Sun Ra is, after all, an alien Egyptian deity, it is entirely natural that he turns down “the offer of Messiahship”. “They wanted me to be one of them”, Ra says, addressing his alien captors (or colleagues?), “and I said no, it's natural for you to be like that, but it might hurt me if you gave me some” (in Sinker 1992). It is worth reflecting

on the possible moral of Ra's tale in which he turns down the alien abduction: as he is *already* alien, Ra can no longer be abducted. Yet is not the double-meaning of this tale, told to Sinker, that Ra cannot be abducted — which is to say, appropriated — by a white journalist? For Ra is telling something else: that as an alien, he occupies a critical position capable of countering the Armageddon-effect: he is able to deflect abduction, precisely because he has abandoned the human, including demands that he answer interview questions with the human coordinates of a rational, straightforward, reply.

Reflecting upon this interview some twenty-odd years later, Sinker writes of Ra: “He had stood on a soapbox on Chicago street-corners, in a fez, just along from where Elijah Muhammad was fashioning the Nation of Islam, creating a cosmology of his own, with himself at its centre — and he had asked people to travel with him. And many had” (2014). But was Ra really at the centre of his own cosmology? This is a perception reinforced by Kodwo Eshun, who characterised Ra as identifying (and I here replay the sample) “with the Pharaohs, the despots, the ancient oppressors, by seceding from America” (1999: 09[154]). In chapter six, I will suggest that Ra's poetic philosophy reveals a much more complex Afrofuturist cosmology: he does not just secede from America, but Earth; and he does not identify with the Pharaohs, but transforms the figure of the Pharaoh just as he transforms himself into an ancient alien deity. It is this esoteric yet powerful theocosmology, and not Ra's prospects as a despotic autotheocentrist, that garnered him “followers”. One such fellow traveller was Ra's greatest jazz disciple, John Coltrane.

The Cosmic Messenger. In the recording of Coltrane's final album, the “interminable and maddening” *Interstellar Space* (1967/1974), 'Trane “warp-drives to the core of the galaxy and the core of the soul”, writes Sinker (1992).²⁸ Both Sinker and Eshun work with metaphors of the cosmic and the alien to

imprint Coltrane's music into language, stretching the capacities of the text in its encounter with Coltrane's "interstellar" jazz. Eshun writes that "the merciless monotony" of *Interstellar Space* "reactivates the predestination of astrology. Energy Music becomes Universal Sound which makes audible the cosmic order, forehears the masterplan in an act of cliraudience" (1999: 10[173]). In short,²⁹ Coltrane's efforts to blast through jazz notation with the sheer force of his instrument alone can be heard as an attempt to escape from the Earthly conventions of jazz performance. "Energy Music" is a term coined by avant-garde jazz saxophonist and Coltrane collaborator Albert Ayler, and is used to describe the forceful playing of multiphonic, free improvisation that emphasises timbre over harmony and melody. Eshun elaborates upon how Coltrane's raw style of overblowing his saxophone entered into a cosmic realm: that of Universal Sound, the sound of *om*, which Coltrane had earlier explored with the spiritual chants of *A Love Supreme* (1964).³⁰ It is the forceful style of Energy Music combined with the cosmic spirituality of Universal Sound that leads to Eshun's "cliraudience", in which *clairvoyance* and *audience* merge into a spiritual-sonic feedback loop. Coltrane carries the audience into this act of making "audible the cosmic order"; Coltrane's music becomes an act of audible, astrological "predestination" in the "forehear[ing]" of the cosmic "masterplan" of Universal Sound. But this is the first stage of Eshun's *om*: the second will be its transformation by electricity to *ohm*, as the Universal Sound shifts from the cosmic jazz player to the figure of the psychedelic Afronaut.

The Afronaut. Sinker writes that Coltrane cannot be thought without hearing Afronaut Jimi

28. Drawing a connection that few in conventional jazz have cared to note, Sinker writes that "Coltrane is incomprehensible unless you see him as Ra's greatest pupil, terminally impatient with limits, with the trivial categories and opposites within Earthly language, and yet inhumanly patient with the fact that such things won't be transcended down here on this plane" (1992). John Corbett notes that Coltrane distributed copies of Ra's esoteric Afrofuturist pamphlet, "Solaristic Precepts" (in Ra 2006: 6); Sinker writes that Ra "weaned [Coltrane] off his addiction, or anyway rerouted it from chemistry to metaphysics".

29. But in reality at length: we will need a paragraph to explicate Eshun's single sentence.

30. Amiri Baraka writes of Coltrane that "The titles of Trane's tunes, 'A Love Supreme', 'Meditations', 'Ascension', imply a strong religious will, conscious of the religious evolution the pure mind seeks. The music is a way into God. The absolute open expression of everything" (1999: 196). This evolution would lead Trane to *Interstellar Space*.

Hendrix, for both pushed the limits of instrumentality and music into cosmic realms: “the utterly fluid spacepoet glided somewhere beyond black and white, masculine and feminine, noise and grace”, writes Sinker. The lithe, manic, intense figure of Hendrix, thrusting into his amplifiers and burning his guitar at the 1967 Monterey Pop Festival, or savagely spraying the audience with sonic bullets during his rendition of “Machine Gun” with the Band of Gypsys in 1969 at the Fillmore East in New York, was not quite human: he was an in-between, near androgynous figure that crossed colour as he transgressed gender, his subjectivity reflecting the in-betweenness of his music that combined blues riffs and psychedelic noise, just as it mixed up his audience, black and white. Hendrix embodies the “Afronaut”, crafting a cosmic alter-ego, undertaking a transformation of self in becoming the spacepoet of cosmic feedback. Sinker’s allusive point is that years before David Bowie’s Ziggy Stardust persona, it was Hendrix who had landed on Earth as the androgynous and shifting star child. This cosmic in-betweenness was nowhere more contentious than with Hendrix’s ambiguity toward race. Hendrix transgressed the racialised expectations endemic to American culture — that he remain a “black” performer. Cultural critics eager to defend traditions of black authenticity have often seen Hendrix as an apostate to black culture; critic Nelson George conservatively “expell[ed] the innovative guitarist from his canonical reconstruction of the black musical idiom”, writes Gilroy (1993: 94). Nonetheless, this excommunication, notes Gilroy, made his “racial alienation literal” — and it is precisely here that, using Sinker’s text, we are able to read “alienation” as “Alien Nation”. Hendrix had embraced something other than black nationalism in his move beyond the categories of gender and colour, just as he pushed, like Coltrane and Ra, the boundaries of black music into cosmic and alien realms. Had Hendrix embraced an unearthly ex-nationalism, the figure of Alien Nation? This question is perhaps best addressed by a

detractor: “Jimi’s music was, if not from another planet, definitely from another country”, writes George (quoted in Gilroy 1993: 94). Indeed, the thrust of George’s criticism is that because Hendrix developed his sound in London, rather than the United States, and save for the Band of Gypsys, played with white musicians as The Jimi Hendrix Experience, he “whitened” his music, abandoning his blues (read: black) roots to psychedelic (read: white) extravagance; in short, he was not an “authentic” black performer. It is precisely this Alien Nation that Hendrix embraced, and that allows us to speak of Hendrix as an Afrofuturist Afronaut. Hendrix alien-ated himself from the very categorical constraints, racial and otherwise, of American culture that are constitutive of George’s attempts to construct an “authentic” black canon. In connecting Coltrane to Hendrix, forever two figures entwined with the ‘60s, one can trace the movement of Eshun’s mantra, wherein the universal chant of *om* becomes the Universal Sound of *ohm*. “Tomorrow every Afronaut and every hippie wakes up to a Universal Sound” (1999: 10[172–3]), writes Eshun of Hendrix. With electrified, cosmic blues, the “Universal Sound” of *om* becomes that of Electricity’s *ohm*. Hendrix calls home to the heavens with his electrified, left-handed guitar, in explaining how the new Church — its meaning here resounding with the black gospel tradition — is that of Electric Religion:

Everything is electrified nowadays. That is why the name Electric Sky Church flashes in and out. I am Electric Religion. We’re making music into a new kind of Bible, a Bible that you can carry in your hearts. One that will give you a physical feeling. — Jimi Hendrix (in Eshun 1999: 01[11])

Hendrix the Afronaut embodies the Electric in-between of the outerspace. Electricity reaches its most superb *ohm*-state of Universal Sound with his abstract, yet entirely emotional outburst of cosmic psychedelia, “And The Gods Made Love” (on *Electric Ladyland* (1968)). Consisting of a wash of

feedback that explodes into cosmic noise, Eshun writes that it “psychedelicizes cybernetics by turning the guitar into a jetstream engine: a 90-second painting of the heavens, a tone generator of sound spectra” (1999: 01[11]). Eshun’s use of “cybernetics” is an apt descriptor. Hendrix’s use of feedback creates a “cybernetic system” between the guitar and the soundsystem. Second-order cybernetics is the modelling of feedback systems, and with “And The Gods Made Love” Hendrix turns the “circular causal” relationships of Norbert Wiener into a cosmic encounter with sound by rendering audible cybernetic recursivity.³¹ Hendrix cranks the pick-up on his guitar until its microphones register the soundsystem’s speakers: what Hendrix plays is not so much the guitar as the entire soundsystem as it feeds-back into itself, a performance of electricity in a technocosmic feedback system.

Outerspace Alien. The Afrofuturist alien invokes a multiplicity of figures, yet almost all tend toward the black alien of outer space.³² What I first wish to emphasise here is the differentiated alien figuration of the Afrofuturist. Sun Ra embodies the alien Pharaoh, while his music transports the big band jazz tradition into outer space, his fellow jazz musicians an interplanetary “Arkestra”. Coltrane embodies the cosmic mystic, his life a spiritual journey that takes him off planet toward the stars, his instrument the means to overblow Universal Sound, to undertake astrological journeys that reveal the cosmic order. Hendrix embodies the Afronaut spacepoet, the space race that floats in-between colour and gender, just as he electrifies the Church of the blues, transporting the sounds of black authenticity into a technocosmic futurism. In each description above, metaphor and the limits of rationalist language are necessary to signify why each of these figures is an *Afrofuturist*, why each figure has undertaken a

31. Norbert Wiener, 1894–1964, was an American mathematician who developed the principles of system feedback known as cybernetics. His application to social systems is perhaps emblematic of what Foucault would call biopolitics (see chapter five). See, in particular, *The Human Use of Human Beings: Cybernetics and Society* (1988).

32. Such as in John Sayles’ 1984 film, *The Brother From Another Planet*, wherein the mute Afro-alien communicates by way of hieroglyphic graffiti. The conceit of Sayles’ film is that unlike his musical compatriots — Ra, George Clinton, Coltrane, Hendrix, etc. — the black alien is mute; he communicates not through music but symbolic pictograms: alien hieroglyphs.

transformation of the self, in different ways and varying degrees, toward the figures of the interstellar, the cosmic, and the alien.

The second aspect of this alien figuration I wish to emphasise is its temporal intervention. The very figure of the Afrofuturist alien is already an embodiment of a historical anomaly: an irruption of something-other than the acceptable paradigm of not only “authentic black existence” — as seen in Hendrix’s expulsion from the “authentic” black canon — but something other to human existence, that stretches or, at the limit, abandons the figure of the human. This becoming-other-than-human, a becoming-alien, suggests a temporality lived otherwise: an impossible (alien) future revealed in the destabilising of the present by revisioning the coordinates of the past.

Sun Ra is an ancient black alien deity: by entering from the Kemetian past as an alien figure of the future, he is able to posit an alternate timeline in which the fall of Egypt never happened, and in which, to sample Eshun, “the West is just a side-effect” (1999: 09[156]). Coltrane seeks to blow into the future of jazz, but does so by rewinding the past and time-travelling to before the big band era, before Louis Armstrong, and embracing an alternate timeline of jazz development in which free improvisation never gave way to formal composition.³³ Hendrix appears to erase his immediate past; he abandons the American order of “the Negro”, leaves to London, and refashions a future-self that eschews racialised baggage just as it founds a new Electric Religion. My point here, as I introduced with Jeff Mills in chapter two, is that Afrofuturist transformations of the subject are always temporal interventions: they

33. Amiri Baraka argues that “the *solo* . . . as first exemplified by Louis Armstrong, is very plain indication of the changed sensibility the West enforced. The return to collective improvisations, which finally, the West-oriented, the whitened, says is chaos, is the *all-force* put together, and is what is wanted. Rather than accompaniment and a solo voice, the miniature ‘thing’ securing its ‘greatness’. Which is where the West is” (1999: 197). This critique sidesteps two points: (1) that both the solo and collective free improvisation are inventions of “the West” just as they are of “Black Music”; and that (2) resistance was not only to be found among white listeners and critics to the “chaos” of free improvisation (or Ra’s eclectic, outerspace composition, which are rarely improvised), but among black traditionalists. Baraka, who himself inhabited multiple types of black culture, nonetheless distinguishes among them, critiquing those who adopt the “unswingingness” of “contemporary European and white Euro-American music” (1999: 192).

necessarily break with, remodel, or revise the timeline to remake a future in the present. “Tradition” — that word for ritual often bagged with its own conservatism — is in each case challenged, rewritten, or discarded. As can be seen with the criticism of Hendrix (or the general dismissal of Sun Ra by “traditional” jazz critics, the same who tend to dismiss the “later” Coltrane) such transformative strategies are seen as profoundly impacting the boundaries of “authentic” black culture. But here we must re-pose Sinker’s question: what “normal” is there to return to? By abandoning the “normal” and embracing the alien, the figure of the Afrofuturist revises the past — that “undiscovered country” all but erased during the Middle Passage. Each alien becoming suggests an alternate timeline to Western history, a recasting of temporal and cosmic possibilities.³⁴

Alondra Nelson writes that Afrofuturist “works simultaneously referenced a past of abduction, displacement and alien-nation, and inspired technical and creative innovations in the work of such artists as Lee ‘Scratch’ Perry, George Clinton and Sun Ra” (2000). Nelson articulates the prevailing vision of the Afrofuturist refashioning of the past that I have been tracing here: it is a temporality of “abduction, displacement, and alien-nation”, and as such, it is entirely unnatural: there is no “normal” to return to. This has led to two divergent, yet parallel strategies in combatting the Armageddon-effect, in particular the erasures of Afrodiasporic history and the inheritance of cultural trauma. The first strategy emphasises traditionalism, and the rebuilding of an “authentic” black culture, a movement that finds its apex in black nationalism and Afrocentrism (which I will turn to below and in chapter four). The second utilises many of the same tools (a revisioning of the past, a radicalism of creative black production), but tends toward exodus: it remakes black culture by pushing its boundaries, by

34. As Rollefson writes in a similar vein, Afrofuturism is struck by a “tension between fantasies of both ‘the past’ and ‘the future’” (2008: 90).

questioning the value of “authentic” blackness, finding its most extravagant expression in Afrofuturism, in which both “Earth” and “human” are abandoned (I will turn to exodus in chapter five). It is tempting to oppose these strains to each other — the traditional against the futurist, the static against the dynamic, the conservative against the progressive — but this would misunderstand how both embrace invention. Both strategies revision the past, reinterpret history, and construct alternate futures through creative intervention in the timeline. Both are also historically entwined.

Yet there is a distinction to be made in how each strategy encounters the figure of the alien. Both view the events of slavery as abduction, as founding the system of Alien Nation. Poet and critic LeRoi Jones, who in 1967 changed his name to Amiri Baraka after the assassination of Malcolm X, straddles both strategies, if not at times swinging from one extreme to another, adopting at various times beatnik, black nationalist, and Marxist positions. A black nationalist and Marxist during much of the 1960s, he was also an ardent supporter of Sun Ra.³⁵ Writing of James Brown, Amiri Baraka identifies “a system governed by ‘aliens’” in which black cultural and spiritual expression “transcends the physical-mental ‘material,’ finally alien system-world it has to go through” (1999: 190). Yet while Afrocentrism and black nationalism battle Alien Nation with the “historical recovery” of cultural authenticity and tradition, Afrofuturism *embraces* its science fictional production. Afrofuturism thus operates by way of paradoxically embracing figures of the past while eschewing claims to authenticity or tradition. But with both strategies, acknowledged or not, the past is but an archive for repurposing, a timeline to be

35. This particular incarnation of Baraka stands both inside and out of Afrofuturism. Though a herald of jazz experimentation in Sun Ra, Ayler, Coltrane, and Ornette Coleman, his position implicitly disavows what would follow with hip-hop, techno, and house, all of which sampled or were in-part inspired by white European artists such as Kraftwerk. While the Arkestra played the Black Arts Repertory Theater/School (BARTS) and led the opening parade across 125th street in full outer space regalia, with Ra a prominent figure during the short-lived heyday of BARTS (1965–66), during which Baraka and the BARTS contributed to a political radicalisation of his music (see Szwed 1998: 209–12), Ra played for all audiences, remained “downtown”, and collaborated with white artists (such as Phill Niblock). By Szwed’s assessment, Baraka’s “nationalism was too earthly and materialistic” for Ra (1998: 212). For his part, Baraka acknowledged that Ra sought to expand both black *and human* consciousness (in Ra 2011: viii). As Baraka later reflected, “Sun Ra had a larger agenda [than black nationalism]” (in Szwed 1998: 211).

sampled, a chronology to be upset with intervention. Sinker underlines precisely this point:

The triumph of black American culture is that, forcibly stripped by the Middle Passage and Slavery Days of any direct connection with African mother culture, it has nonetheless survived by syncretism, by bricolage, by a day-to-day programme of appropriation and adaptation as resourcefully broad-minded as any in history. But still, the humane tradition — of warmth, community hope and aspiration — central to the gospel roots soul of the southern black tradition is, if treated as the principle that underlies all, a way of hiding from these facts in plain sight: that this tradition is no more uniquely “African” than the Nation of Islam is “Islamic”, that this culture is still — in its constituent parts — very much a patchwork borrowing; necessary of course for physical and psychic survival, but not an unarguable continuity (1992).

For Sinker as for Gilroy, Afrodiasporic culture is but an invention, “very much a patchwork borrowing”, cobbled together to fill a cultural and historical void left behind by the Middle Passage. Yet this constituent mixology — its *bricolage* of sampled concepts and practices — reflects a shared project of cultural re-construction, wrought through the criss-crossing of the black Atlantic network by its cultural exports: radio and television transmissions, sound recordings (from vinyl to digital formats), films, videos, literatures, and the travels of performers themselves.³⁶ Black Atlantic cultures have evolved through the call-and-response of aesthetic production, in the reimagining of contested yet shared historical themes and ties, of which one of its most intriguing, challenging, and complex assemblages is Afrofuturism.

36. As I will return to elsewhere, Gilroy writes that “This reciprocal relationship [between audience and performer] can serve as an ideal communicative situation even when the original makers of the music and its eventual consumers are separated in space and time or divided by the technologies of sound reproduction and the commodity form which their art has sought to resist” (1993: 102–03). Of note, Gilroy echoes Derrida here, who argues that such reciprocity is the very *condition* of the sign, including its technical networks of communicability (see 1997).

The Manufactured History: Chronopolitics of Past and Future

The manufactured history . . . The manufactured history!
How came the manufactured history?
Because of the void . . . The manufactured history was
substituted for the void in order to keep man from feeling empty
And without foundation.
— Sun Ra, “The Invented Memory” [1968] (2005a: 61)

The Afrofuturist imaginary reaches into the past to reimagine a future otherwise. It upsets what Greg Tate calls the “black reverence for the past [that] is a reverence for paradise lost” with “a vein of philosophical inquiry and technological speculation that begins with the Egyptians and their incredibly detailed meditations on life after death” (in Dery 1994a: 210–11). Afrofuturism recodes the past out of a contemporary urgency to deal with the historical void left by the Middle Passage and the enforced erasures of slavery — and thus to project a futurity otherwise. The past is barely known, “a past gleaned from discussions”, argues Tate, and thus open to its revisioning (in Dery 1994a: 211). In this section, I turn to chronopolitics and its theorisation in Eshun’s 2003 essay, “Further Considerations of Afrofuturism”, so as to position it in light of the following chapters, where I will read the Afrofuturist chronopolitics of slavery.

Eshun argues for the political efficacy of temporal strategies that not only revision the past, but upset programmatic schemas for the future:

The field of Afrofuturism does not seek to deny the tradition of countermemory. Rather, it aims to extend that tradition by reorienting the intercultural vectors of Black Atlantic temporality towards the proleptic as much as the retrospective.

It is clear that power now operates predictively as much as retrospectively. Capital continues to function through the dissimulation of the imperial archive, as it has done throughout the last century. Today, however, power also functions through the envisioning, management, and delivery of reliable futures (Eshun 2003: 289).

It is my intention here to further explicate the operational characteristics of chronopolitics so that, as a concept descriptive of a set of temporal practices, it can be put to effective use. Nearly all of Afrofuturism's effects are "chronopolitical". Afrofuturism is thoroughly invested in either imagining alternate futures or rewriting the past so as to change the present (from which futures are imagined). At stake is a recovery of past cycles of futurity and the derailing of whitewashed cycles currently in effect. To wit,

(i) Chronopolitics intervenes in the production of collective memory — institutional, pedagogical, epistemic and museological histories, oral traditions and myths — as well as in the schematic projections of the future. This collective memory is inscribed in texts, cultural practices, and technological objects (the latter what I will sample from Kittler as "occult media" in chapter six (Kittler 1999));

(ii) Chronopolitics is the temporal production of counter-memories and counter-realities to combat corporate, whitewashed, or technocapitalist futures of dystopia. It is also a historical recovery operation, in which erasures and evacuations of the unwanted, insurrectionary, or traumatic past are uncovered and put to use, in the "responsibility . . . towards the not-yet" (2003: 289). Chronopolitics can be read in Ra's words, when he writes that: "If a man can be tempted to think, thereby a better memory can he / create than the one implanted in his mind from the / So-called past" (2005a: 61).

In his 2003 essay, Eshun explores how chronopolitics extends the terrain of political agency to the

field of temporality. Eshun's concept of "chronopolitics" echoes similar strategies developed by utopianist texts and the mechanisms of time-travel in science fiction.³⁷ Fredric Jameson, in his study of the "utopian desire" in science fiction, *Archaeologies of the Future*, discusses how (modern) narratives of progress are "now seen as attempt[s] to colonize the future, to draw the unforeseeable back into tangible realities, in which one can invest and on which one can bank, very much in the spirit of stock market 'futures'" (2005: 228).³⁸ Jameson notes that, along with Walter Benjamin's observation that "not even the past will be safe" from the "conquerors" of history, that "the future is not safe either" from "the elimination of historicity, its neutralization by way of progress and technological evolution" — the latter which he names "the future of globalization" (2005: 228). Drawing closer to the notion of a synchronic historicity that animates his study, Jameson argues that the "antinomies of cause and effect are today exasperated by the emergence of the notion of system", whereby he traces a "gravitational shift from diachronic thinking (so-called linear history) to synchronic or systemic modeling" (2005: 87). Chronopolitics, as a concepttechnics, partakes of the latter synchrony, amplified into a strategy. Jameson applies this strategy himself by rewriting Asimov's periodised history of SF into "so many possible dominants which form different functional constellations" (2005: 92). The latter sf assemblages are developed and critiqued throughout the rest of Jameson's text. Jameson does not, then, read "utopias" as "in" the future, but rather undertakes a chronopolitical revisioning of past utopian futurisms and alternate-utopian timelines that reveal a plurality of elsewhere/elsewhens.

37. This claim is novel neither to politics nor to science fiction in general. That history is written by the victors is a worn but truthful cliché of history. It is part of Sun Tzu's general strategy: "to subdue the enemy without fighting is the acme of skill" (1971: 77). Chronopolitics is the Supreme in nonfighting strategy. Time-travelling to divert a conflict before it begins is the acme of chronopolitics.

38. In a similar vein, Eshun writes: "Science fiction is now a research and development department within a futures industry that dreams of the prediction and control of tomorrow. Corporate business seeks to manage the unknown through decisions based on scenarios, while civil society responds to future shock through habits formatted by science fiction. Science fiction operates through the power of falsification, the drive to rewrite reality, and the will to deny plausibility, while the scenario operates through the control and prediction of plausible alternative tomorrows" (2003: 291).

As if to acknowledge the precedents set elsewhere for chronopolitics, Eshun's text opens with a science fictional narrative describing Afrofuturist time-travellers returning to our forgotten past:

Imagine a team of African archaeologists from the future—some silicon, some carbon, some wet, some dry—excavating a site, a museum from their past: a museum whose ruined documents and leaking discs are identifiable as belong- ing to our present, the early twenty-first century (Eshun 2003: 287).

Eshun's concept of chronopolitics has a specificity, however, and that is its articulation with Afrofuturism, or rather, its theorisation through the latter. Eshun explains that the chronopolitical field has two interconnected vectors: that of the past (retrospective) and that of the future (proleptic). The stuff of the past is produced: it is interpreted from artifacts, institutionalised in museums, scripted into technologies, and synthesized into what Ra calls "the manufactured history" that shapes the collective memory of the subject. The stuff of the future is predicted: it is charted, mapped, and rendered numerical by algorithms, based upon "the manufactured past" (to use Foucault's term, it is *biopolitical*, in the statistical analysis of population timelines (2003); see chapter five). The future is thus all but programmed into the subject through a pedagogy of the past.³⁹ Thus, for Afrofuturism, the stakes of chronopolitics are entwined with upsetting the Armageddon-effect. Chronopolitics are mobilised to revision accounts of slavery and colonialism and to rewrite its trauma by seeding alternate futures for Afrodiasporic subjects who have been overdetermined by "the manufactured past".

When manufactured histories reinforce ethnocentrist narratives, they become prime targets for the retrospective interventions of chronopolitics. In a passage concerning "museological" interventions, Eshun writes that "for contemporary African artists, understanding and intervening in the production

39. A point made by Frantz Fanon (2008) (among many others) but also Paolo Freire, who criticizes the "banking" approach to education, where "education thus becomes an act of depositing" (1970: 58).

and distribution of this [temporal] dimension constitutes a chronopolitical act” (2003: 192).

“Revisioning” the past is not just part of Afrocentrism’s arsenal of historical reconstruction, but a strategy of Afrofuturism:

By creating temporal complications and anachronistic episodes that disturb the linear time of progress, these [Afro]futurisms adjust the temporal logics that condemned black subjects to prehistory. Chronopolitically speaking, these revisionist historicities may be understood as a series of powerful competing futures that infiltrate the present at different rates (2003: 297).

Upsetting received narratives of the past constitutes not just an intervention that deprograms the coordinates of the present, but reprograms the future. Sometimes, the best way to reimagine the future is to alter the past. The insertion of a counter-narrative into the constitution of the past releases the trajectories of an unpredictable futurity. The same can be said in its inverse: depicting an alternate futurity can lead to a questioning of received narratives of the past. Science fictional futures that depict successful Afrodiasporic subjects imply a rejection of contemporary raciology.⁴⁰ But, crucially, Afro-futures repurpose, and do not reject, motifs of the past. The synthesis of past revisionism and science fictional futurism can be seen in the Kemetian symbols of Sun Ra: he is both a Pharaoh and an alien, an ancient Kemetian deity and a futurist space traveller. In comparison to futurisms that dismiss the past as anachronistic, arcane, or unsophisticated, Afrofuturism repurposes the past: Afrofuturist chronopolitics calls upon the past, making use of its symbols and tropes, to reinvent the future.

40. One such example noted by Samuel R. Delany is in Robert Heinlein’s *Starship Troopers*, where in the midst of this “boy’s book, a book about the way warfare can mature a young man”, some 200 pages in, “our young hero . . . goes into the bathroom to put on his makeup — for in this future world all men use makeup — [and] as he looks in the mirror, he makes a passing mention of the nearly chocolate brown hue of his face” (2012: 9). Delany says that he “did a strange double take”. The hero of the book was not white, but Filipino. As Delany remarks, more to the point is that the “racial situation . . . had resolved itself to the point where a young soldier might tell you of his adventures for 200 pages out of a 300-page novel and not even *have* to mention his ethnic background — because it had, in his world, become that insignificant!” (2012: 9). Unfortunately, the 1997 film, directed by Paul Verhoeven, eschews Heinlein’s Afrofuturist trajectory and presents an all-white leading cast.

Eshun's chronopolitics, then, acknowledges the debt it has to science fiction as a *practice*, which, in its chronopolitics, "was never concerned with the future, but rather with engineering feedback between its preferred future and its becoming present" (2003: 290).

Stolen Legacies. Strategic use of chronopolitics is at work in both Afrofuturism and Afrocentrism. It traverses the two cultural and political strategies. Though I will explore Afrocentrism in detail in chapter four, in closing I wish to briefly outline their intersection in the operations of chronopolitics. The parallelism of Afrocentrist historical revisioning to Afrofuturist chronopolitics is noted by Eshun:

Revisionist logic is shared by autodidact historians like Sun Ra and George G. M. James of *Stolen Legacy*, and contemporary intellectuals such as Toni Morrison, Greg Tate, and Paul D. Miller [a.k.a. DJ Spooky]. [Morrison's] argument that the African slaves that experienced capture, theft, abduction, and mutilation were the first moderns is important for positioning slavery at the heart of modernity. The cognitive and attitudinal shift demanded by her statement also yokes philosophy together with brutality, and binds cruelty to temporality. The effect is to force together separated systems of knowledge, so as to disabuse apparatuses of knowledge of their innocence (Eshun 2003: 297).

Afrofuturism is as much a recovery project of a revisionist past as it is an imaginary of a future otherwise. Afrofuturism seeks to displace temporality from its whitewashed visions, the latter of which Mark Dery calls "the unreal estate of the future already owned by the technocrats, futurologists, streamliners, and set-designers — white to a man — who have engineered our collective fantasies" (1994a: 180). The figure of Sun Ra embodies this cross-wiring of the futurist, technologically-advanced alien into the past *mythos* of Pharaohnic Kemet, treading a path that parallels — for historical, political, as well as aesthetic reasons — the black nationalism of Afrocentrism.⁴¹

One of the key MythSciences advanced by Afrocentrism — and that I will turn to in the next chapter — is its historical revisioning of a black Pharaohnic philosophical heritage stolen by Greek culture (for example, in James 2001), or what Eshun outlines as the “reactionary Manichaeism of the Nation of Islam, the regressive compensation mechanisms of Egyptology, Dogonesque cosmology, and the totalising reversals of *Stolen Legacy*–style Afrocentricity” (2003: 297). By contrast, Afrofuturism grasps the same symbols, but infuses them with science fiction. Afrocentrism’s Kemetianism is transfigured by Afrofuturism into conceptual matter for new belief-systems, new MythSciences capable of upending and challenging the timeline. The *mythos* of Kemet replaces Greece and the Enlightenment project, but in place of Afrocentrism’s battle for truth, Afrofuturism reimagines the Pharaohs as black aliens, the pyramids as black secret technologies. Whereas Afrocentrism seeks to prove the veracity of its historical claims, Afrofuturism utilises historical revisioning to reimagine alternatives to the timeline in the production of counter-realities.

In closing, I wish to return to Ra, who emphasises his distrust for the past in a text entitled “The Invented Memory” [1968] (2005a: 60). What is intriguing about this text is how it elaborates the impure origins of memory: that at first, in the beginning, memory was never bare, never scrubbed clean, but already invented, manufactured; for Sun Ra, these invented memories keep the hue-man⁴² “from looking / backward into a void . . . Because of what has happened” (2005a: 60). The Afrofuturist genesis of invented memory begins with the trauma of the Middle Passage and slavery: this is the “manufactured history!” of the Afrodiasporic subject. But the Biblical invention of memory — a

41. In a citation I will return to in the next chapter, Eshun writes that “Ra zooms this lost Africa into a lost Pharaohnic Egypt” (Eshun 1999: 09[156]).

42. The “hue-man” is Ra’s inscription (among others) for the construction of the human through the raciological “colour line”. It signals the colour-line otherwise erased in the Enlightenment category of the (whitewashed) “human”.

reading that Ra develops at length, and that I will turn to in chapter six — begins with the Genesis myth: Adam and Eve are given “unschooled conceptions and beliefs” by the creator. These beliefs are challenged, and revealed as the inventions that they are, when the couple attain self-knowledge — in short, Eve was “schooled” when she bit into the apple.⁴³ This self-knowledge, of course, results in the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden.

Ra continues: “The word man is but an / image-symbol / Thus man is striving to be the idea of himself” (2005a: 60). The question is, who determines the meaning of the image-symbol of “man”? *Who* or *what* manufactures the invented memories?

For Eshun, as undoubtedly for Ra, this “idea” is but implanted by what Eshun calls an “imperial racism [that] has denied black subjects the right to belong to the enlightenment project” (2003: 287). Afrodiasporic subjects are forever unable to live up to such an “idea of Man”, resulting in the perpetuation of what W.E.B. du Bois named “double-consciousness” (1994). However, it is this very emptiness of “the idea of Man” that opens upon the chronopolitics of Afrofuturism and its production of MythSciences and their unhuman becomings.



43. In a footnote to a reading of a later text developed in chapter six, “The Tree is Wood” (Ra 2005a: 192), I here note the “wormwood” or “spiritwood/would” implied by biting into the apple.

Chapter 04

We Have Never Been Human:

Dehumanisation, Afrofuturism and Afrocentricity

The problems inherent in the contradiction in the slave's legal existence as man and thing constantly emerged. Those who demanded absolute obedience were trying to reduce the slave to an extension of the master's will, which the best of the slaveholders took for granted as humane and just. But the effort could not be sustained even when supported by terror and the greatest violence. At law and in the community, limitations everywhere arose, in no small part because the slaves fought to impose them (Genovese 1976: 88).

The Revolutionary War and the Civil War were two wars fought on American soil, supposedly for freedom and democracy — but if these two wars were really for freedom and human dignity of *all* men, why are 20 million of our people still confined and enslaved?

— Malcolm X, 18th August 1963¹

African Americans, in a very real sense, are the descendents of alien abductees; they inhabit a sci-fi nightmare in which unseen but no less impassable force fields of intolerance frustrate their movements (Dery 1994a: 180).

1. Speech made in Washington, D.C., at a local Nation of Islam meeting (in Marable 2011: 254).

What does it mean to be enslaved, to be classified as unhuman, to be “dehumanised”?² In *Between Camps*, Paul Gilroy underscores the “absence of an adequate conceptual and critical language” for addressing the “density of today’s mixed and always impure forms” of Afrodiasporic — and Afrofuturological — belonging (2004: 251). But what languages, and imaginative as well as critical lexicons, are capable of addressing the raciology of alienation and its dehumanisation program? In the last chapter, I traced a number of science fictional motifs and tropes, explicating them as quasi-concepts, articulated through practices and becomings, that along with a demonstrable counter-tradition, make up an Afrofuturist lexicon attentive to these concerns. As well as developing an “adequately conceptual” and “critical” language, such a lexicon needs to be able to address the *imaginative, futurological* and *speculative* dimensions of combatting raciology — by which I mean discourses that deploy the coordinates of “race” as a power relation. In the critical but imaginative encounter with “impure forms” — those informalities that refuse to be categorised into the order of pure being — the Afrofuturist lexicon articulates the shapes and processes of becoming. The interventionist temporal activities of chronopolitics that impurely mixes the past with the present to envision a thoroughly “impurefected” future coalesce into MythSciences. In particular, I have drawn attention to the science fictional quasi-concepts at work in the analyses of Dery (1994a), Eshun (1999), and Sinker (1992) that revolve around the figure of the alien.

In the speculative fiction of Afrofuturist worldviews (what I have called an “offworlding”), slavery is a system of alien abduction.³ But once abducted by the alien invader, who sees himself not as alien but as

2. As I write this revision, the 1965 Voting Rights Act — a landmark of the Civil Rights Movement that ensures voting access for minoritarian voters — has been overturned by the Supreme Court of The United States, thereby allowing the state of Texas to redraw voting districts so as to discriminate against growing numbers of black and Latino voters, as well as to legislate discriminatory laws of identification that favour certain forms of legal ID (expired gun licenses from other states, for example) over others (such as student ID). I mark this date: 25 June 2013.

3. As noted by John Szwed (1998), the inverse is also true: alien abduction narratives (such as Sun Ra’s) follow the patterning of slave

“human”, the abductees are forcibly dehumanised into alien-ation through the institution of an ontological classification system. All subhumans are designated alien property, chattel, slave. The New World is defined — ordered and rationalised, economically, socially, politically — by its shackled ontology of forced labour and subhuman property. This is not to ignore the emerging global networks of capitalist colonisation that required slaves to extract resources in order to be profitable. Rather, my aim here is to focus on the raciology that supports its economic infrastructure, that justifies it at the level of discourse, and that organises its ontological classification system. The subhuman is marked by the raciology of what Frantz Fanon called “epidermalisation”: the mark of inferiority is externalised upon the skin; the epidermis is the site of ontological classification of the subhuman to the human (2004: xv). Black Atlantic slavery is perceived, in its total phenomenon, as producing (the) Alien Nation. Alien Nation persists as a spatiotemporal eschaton, a post-temporal wasteland of sorts in which the timeline has exceeded its finitude. Beyond the apocalypse of alien abduction, time continues into Alien Nation. In the words of Public Enemy, “Armageddon been-in-effect”.

The split sign of “Alien Nation” suggests an ambiguous, heterogeneous meaning, hesitating between a dispersed and diasporic belonging articulated through alien solidarity — the “nation of the alienated” — and its conditions of alienation: the alien-ation of being-alien in an alien world. The “Nation” is likewise ambiguous in its meaning and contested in its political signification, suggesting both the nation of the abductor, the “human”, as well as the nation of the alien, of the abducted. Alien Nation, then, is an offworlding: a worldview encompassing the totality of relations possible that also contains, crucially, the impossibility of becoming-alien. Becoming-alien is the line of flight, the movement of

abductions. The constitutive aspect of this relationship (its cyclicity) is explored by the chronopolitics of Armageddon been-in-effect and the dual meaning of Alien Nation (as both belonging and estrangement). See also Mark Harrison’s account of alien abductions, “How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Get Along with the Gray” (2000).

exodus, the vehicle of escape velocity, not to an exteriority or outside, but an exodus within the alien interiority of the system. The Afrofuturist trajectory *affirms the alien by transforming it*, wresting its limited, subhuman ontology from the grasp of the abductor. The denigrated subhumanity of the alien is transformed to an affirmative *un*humanity, an alien-becoming that undermines the privileged abductor ontology of the “human”.

Such is the path I trace throughout this project: of explicating the speculative fiction of the Afrofuturist lexicon. A lexicon that is as dispersed as its diaspora, that appears and communicates through multiple modes of media, production, art, becoming.

But beyond developing the inflections of a lexicon, lies Gilroy’s second, more challenging exhortation. Gilroy calls upon scholars to remain cautious when championing cultural forms such as hip-hop that share a “corporate developmental association with the commercially sponsored subcultures that have been shaped around television, advertising, cartoons and computer games” (2004: 180). Despite their apparent globalisation of subcultural authenticity, the commodified regimes of black cultural forms remain, according to Gilroy, “attractively packaged pseudo-rebellion”, thus pressing the need for “renegade academics” to not sidestep the ethical and political issues that enframe cultural products (2004: 179). Such a turn requires, according to Gilroy, going beyond the “easier work of analyzing lyrics, the video images that complement them, and the de-skilled technological features of [their] production” (2004: 182). It requires being attentive to the “phenomenology and integrity” of such forms (182), and to undertaking what I contend is a speculative and imaginative analysis of the conditions and processes of belonging, in a manner that acknowledges but does not needlessly repeat the gesture of celebrating the hybridity of origins. “We do know where hip-hop, reggae, soul, and house

originated and can identify the historical, technological, and cultural resources from which they are constituted”, writes Gilroy, “yet this information does not help either to place them or to assess their contemporary consequences” (2004: 251). Granted the “revolutionary *conservatism*” that Gilroy analyses as latent within black cultural forms, there is a pressing need to analyse the “consequences” of cultural assemblages that replicate structures of racism, patriarchy, sexism, misogyny, and homophobia, as well as uncritically advocating commodification and unfettered consumerism (2004: 180). Kodwo Eshun addresses some of Gilroy’s concerns when he identifies a futurological trajectory of hip-hop, signified in the phrase “to drop *science* is to mystify”, that turns away from celebrating capitalist bling and replicating the ghetto-logics of racialised impoverishment, lending invention and imagination instead to a MythScience of offworld alternatives (my italics, 1999: 03[029]). For the Afrofuturist hip-hop trajectory of RAMM:ΣLL:ZΣΣ, Rakim, The RZA and Killah Priest, “[Myth]science is the end of edutainment and the systematic mythification of everyday life” just as, crucially, “[Myth]science actively derealises the solid ground of the street” (Eshun 1999: 03[029]).⁴ These MythScientific forms of hip-hop — what is known in the industry as “conscious hip-hop” — do not operate outside of the capitalist assemblage. Often, as in the case of Wu-Tang Clan, Dr Octagon and RZA’s B.O.B.B.Y. Digital project, their agency reflects a repurposing of capitalist tools of commercialisation and bling, as well as problematic tropes of misogyny and masculinity, so as to organise a collective exodus from the psychogeographical constraints of the territorialised ghetto. Thus attending to Gilroy’s concerns also requires a nuanced reading attentive to the ways in which forms of exodus, as mentioned above, organise themselves within a system — neoliberal, capitalist, etc. — that has no outside.

Granted that Gilroy’s critical comments pertain to the whole of this project, I wish to develop, to a

4. I will turn to The RZA and his alter-ego Bobby Digital in the next chapter.

limited degree, some of the *conditions* of the Afrofuturist speculative and science fictional array of concepts. In this chapter, I undertake a reading of the traumatic past of slavery and, in the next chapter, explore the concepts of colonised, enslaved, and double “consciousness”, as revisioned *through* the chronopolitical concepts developed by Afrofuturist and other texts. The simplistic notion of a consequence, as if an effect from a cause, is complicated in the chronopolitical act of revisioning conditions: Afrofuturism, as a “consequence” of colonialism and slavery, consequently revises the conditions of slavery and colonialism.⁵

The global resonance of Armageddon been-in-effect suggests that “colonialism” itself requires rethinking. I should here note that I read the case of the United States as a *colonial* undertaking. This is not to erase the economic and organisational differences between the American context and its Caribbean (or South American) variants — in particular that, as in Saint-Domingue, slaves outnumbered the masters, unlike the predominantly white American south⁶ — but it is to emphasise a structural commonality in the importation of slaves, establishment of slavery practices, and “dehumanisation” of its forced labourers. It is also to read the geography and political organisation of the United States as if it were a distribution of colonial empires in the form of plantations. The geographical and political incoherence of the pre-Civil War United States undermines its contemporary conceptualisation as a “nation-state”. Taken at the level of its microgeography of plantation systems, and keeping in mind the colonising aspect of “Western exploration” through territory already inhabited by First Peoples, the Antebellum United States operated as if an archipelago of colonies, each run by its

5. In chapter three, I emphasised the conceptual infrastructure of chronopolitics in Fredric Jameson’s “synchronic historicity” that turns from diachrony to system (2005).

6. C.L.R. James estimates that the slave population of Saint-Domingue in 1789 totalled 500,000, ruled over by 32,000 whites (1989: 45, 55). Colonies such as Saint-Domingue required massive resupplies of slaves, varying from 10,000 to 40,000 a year. Between 1783 and 1791 some 790,000 African slaves were imported, accounting for one-third of the entire Atlantic slave trade.

own elite cadre of masters.

In this cyclic chain of Afrofuturist revisioning, the “consequence” enters into a chronopolitical play that destabilises the meaning of its “cause”. At the same time, there are other consequences to assess from the assigning of conditionality — of an original condition in its universalising authenticity — to any historical epoch. The development of Afrocentric forms of belonging are dependent upon (rather than transgressive and transformative of) raciology. The logic of racial hierarchy, purity, and distinctive ontology needs to authenticate its origins in the coordinates of civilisational superiority, and the safeguarded transmission of an epidermalised ontological essence.

In this chapter, I explore the nexus of conditionality in Atlantic slavery, focusing upon a minor reading of the American context. By this I mean I read minoritarian approaches to the Revolutionary War, Antebellum slavery, the Civil War, and Reconstruction that emphasise the exodus and revolt of “slaves”. These approaches also suggest that the United States was a particularly fractured “nation-state”, in which zones of instability and slippages between the map and the territory were exploited by the enslaved to produce lines of flight. These zones of instability also extend to the cultivated misperception between master and slave — particularly the plantation slaveowner’s self-fulfilling ideology of paternalism and the strategic double-consciousness of the enslaved — that allowed for the enslaved to undertake sudden and decisive acts of exodus. My intention is to trace how Afrofuturism’s motif of the alien became the *modus operandi* of exodus from Enlightenment humanism, while at the same time positioning it to its contrast, but also entwined movement, that of Afrocentricity. With the modes of the alien deity and star child, the android and the cosmic messenger, from Hendrix to Ra, Monáe to Mills, we bear witness to Afrofuturist becomings that approach, and transgress, the limits of performing

allegories of slavery and colonialism. I suggest, however, that this transgression of allegory has, in a way, “always already” taken place: the futurological conditions of Afrofuturism reside precisely within the records of slavery and colonialism. There is, nonetheless, no one precise historical origin. There are only effects (“consequences”) of a displacement of the “human” wrought within the barbarous systems of colonialism and slavery. The consequence of such unhuman becoming is that the privileged Enlightenment category of the *human* is rendered fraught. Yet has the “human” always been a universal, entirely neutral and static mold from which all subjects are cast? Have “we” always been “human”? Have not Afrofuturist becomings revealed the implicit plasticity of the human, an inherent mutation that has already been utilised to exclude the human from its subservient others, its animals, things, and slaves, a system of categorisation wielded to further raciologies — and specieologies — of power? It is by recognising, addressing, and exploiting the fragility of the human — the fact of its mythical construction, or its artifice of MythScience — that we can consider how the Afrofuturist *alien* is proffered in its becoming.⁷ But why this radical response that undertakes an imaginative, science fictional deconstruction of the Enlightenment project of the “human”? Why not any number of other strategies?

Extreme indifference: dehumanisation (I)

The system of Atlantic slavery supposed an *ontological* division between master and slave. The master had a name; it signalled ownership over himself and his property. The slave’s name, derived from the master’s, signalled that s/he was but property.⁸ The master, in name and property — and I here

7. This latter task we will turn to in chapter six by reading Sun Ra with Heidegger.

8. I am riffing here on a observation from Simon Schama, who notes in *Rough Crossings* that post-slave names signalled “something

emphasise the patriarchal authority — was an authentic human subject, a complete and conscious being of the flesh. The slave was but the embodiment of labour, what Simon Schama calls “negotiable property” (2008: 4), a “Negro” without humanity and its supposed traits, lacking “self-consciousness” and thus without the ability (never mind the “right”) of self-determination. It is under these conditions that we encounter the Afrofuturist abandonment of the human, its strategy of “extreme indifference to the human” (Eshun 1999: 00[-005]). To contextualise the force of such “extreme indifference” — an indifference that has been too hastily critiqued for abandoning the body as such⁹ — one must first proceed by asking the question: but *whose* definition of the “human”? It is this question that Eshun, in his work, does not dwell upon to any great extent. His compendium of Sonic Futurism is more concerned with the effects of abandonment, its imaginative plays and strategies, its technologies and affects, rather than the conditions that have led to it. By placing the “human” within a sociohistorical context as coterminous to the manufacture of the “slave”, by removing the “human” from its transcendental register of being, I seek to nuance as well as give greater weight to the strategic exile from the human subject. The stakes of this move will become more clear in what follows, but various avenues can already be brought to question: the terminus of a juridico-legal internationalism enshrined in “human rights” would already find itself interrogated by a post-humanism extended to the (well)being of all “species”.¹⁰ What does it mean to abandon the “human” as the locus of the “who”?

important: that [the ex-slave] was no longer negotiable property” (2008: 4).

9. As I discussed in chapters one and two, see Weheliye’s critique of Eshun (2002; 2005).

10. I hold “species” in quotation marks for its translation of raciology through humanism. Here I touch upon a manifesto or direction that bears its debt to Donna Haraway. The “*ironic* political myth” of the “Manifesto for Cyborgs” signifies the androidal status of woman as much as it alludes to robotic slavery. Haraway’s deconstruction of the human/animal/machine in her theorisation of “companion species” and her explorations of the “implosion of subjects and objects in the entities populating the world at the end of the Second Millenium” (my italics, 2004b: 7, 242) runs parallel to my concerns. Interrogating the human “species” was also the opening/closing act for Derrida: in *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, Derrida writes of the *ani-mots* and its reductive naming: “*Animal* is a word that men [*l’homme*] have given themselves the right to give . . . they have given themselves the word in order to corral a large number of living beings within a single concept” (2008: 32). The animal, as man, is a raciological invention. In the two volumes of *The Beast & the Sovereign*, Derrida explores the chiasmus between “man” and “animal” through an extended reading of the “zoo-logical interpretation of man” (2009: 431). In volume II,

A brief aside on this point, to set the stakes for not only this chapter, but to orient the stakes of the Afrofuturist abandonment of the human to a different calculation. Derrida meditates precisely upon the question of “who is the ‘who’” in “‘Eating Well,’ or the Calculation of the Subject”, where he interrogates, through Heidegger, “the question of man [*l’homme*]”:

The possibility for the indeterminate ‘who’ [in Heidegger but metaphysics as a whole] to become subject, or, more originarily, to become *Dasein* and *Dasein* thrown (*geworfene*) into the world, is reserved for man alone. . . . As long as these oppositions have not been deconstructed [between “man” and “the living in general”] we will reconstitute under the name of subject, indeed under the name of *Dasein*, an *illegitimately* delimited identity, illegitimately, but often precisely under the authority of rights! — in the name of a particular kind of [“human”] rights. For it is in order to put a stop to a certain kind of rights [rights of the “living in general”], to a certain juridico-politico calculation, that this questioning [of the “*who*-man”] has been interrupted.

Deconstruction therefore calls for a different kind of rights, or, rather lets itself be called by a more exacting articulation of rights, prescribing, in a different way, more responsibility (Derrida 1995: 273).

What would the unalienable rights of the alien other look like? Gilroy too argues that “however important the relatively narrow understanding of freedom centred on political rights has been, it leaves untouched vast areas of thinking about freedom and the desire to be free” (2004: 193). A few pages after this passage, Gilroy turns to rapper Snoop Dogg, whose “identity” as a “low down dirty dog” Gilroy situates “in the genealogy of technologies of the free black self” (2004: 203, 205). Freedom is here articulated to four legs. Gilroy positions Snoop’s becoming-animal as a “political and moral gesture” that

Derrida traces the animal’s exclusion from subjectivity (by Aristotle) as that which “can neither speak, nor pray, nor lie” (like Derrida, I believe my Siamese cat, Tobiko, disproves all three theses) (2011: 229). I have not addressed these texts here because they would, in this context, displace a theorisation *through* Afrofuturism. See also Cary Wolfe’s *Animal Rites: American Culture, the Discourse of Species, and Posthumanist Theory* (2003), and Agamben, *The Open: Man and Animal* (2004). I am also indebted to Sha LaBare for his militant poly-speciesism in his *Farfetchings* (2010).

upsets “ethnic absolutism and its body signs” (2004: 203, 205). Snoop’s downwards-dogg stages dehumanisation, revaluing infrahumanity in an eroticised doggyness that refuses identification with the “perfected, invulnerable male body” (2004: 203). Snoop, in his becoming-dogg, is neither a thing nor a person, nor quite the animal that hovers in-between. The question of civil rights is exceeded just as other civilities: the civility of language gives way to “the full, vulgar, antibourgeois force of the black vernacular” (“if you don’t give a shit like I don’t give a shit”) while the privacies of sexual intimacy are thoroughly uncivilised (and unclean) in Snoop’s “funky, bestial sex” (Gilroy 2004: 203–04).

The Afrofuturist abandonment of the “human” leads to a proliferation of alien lifeforms. It infers an unEarthly perspective — as if from orbit — whereby “life in general” is perceived in its alien diversity. From orbit, there is no one “master race” atop the Great Chain of Being. Snoop Doggs are on level with RZA’s warrior-monks, just as both are on level with butterflies and siamese cats. Animals are aliens too. This fantasy is, of course, a MythScience, but one inferred from the counter-realities of Afrofuturism. Let us return to dehumanisation: the revaluation of infrahumanity.

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The forced labour and sociopolitical system of slavery has been considered an exemplary practice of *dehumanisation*. What I wish to posit is the inverse, but necessary thesis: that the dehumanisation of the slave requires the institution of human supremacy. Accounts of dehumanisation proceed as if the “human” was an a priori condition of existence.¹¹ Dehumanisation, in its most understood sense, articulates the debasement of the human subject, its apparent reduction to a subpar species, unworthy of dignity and respect, and thus treated with violence, as a labouring machine to be worked. Paul Gilroy,

11. Such as the slave narrative explored here (Jacobs 2001),

commenting on the “process of dehumanisation”, writes that it confines “‘nonwhite’ people to the status of animals or things”, while also noting, after Primo Levi, how the “role of numbers” dehumanises subjectivity to a statistic (2004: 300–01). The qualitative is reduced to the quantitative; the being to a thing; an end to a means. In what follows I do not wish to undermine the canonical, as well as juridico-politico interpretation of dehumanisation that names the historical implementation of various genocidal projects. Rather, what I wish to explore is how, *under Afrofuturism*, dehumanisation has been reinterpreted to wage a critique against its processes without investing in the Enlightenment humanism that has produced it. I will suggest that the critical transformation of dehumanisation through Afrofuturist operations explores potential avenues that work past and destabilise the division of the human to the unhuman — and thus charts another path through the thoroughly *human* process of “dehumanisation”.

Afrofuturism suggests a radical dimension to the negative valences of unhumanist becoming: that there is an-other possibility that emerges in the abandonment of the human. The alternative arises not by turning away from dehumanisation, but by passing through a deconstructive affirmation of its unhumanism. It suggests that dehumanisation can be invested with a different meaning: that of a strategic exile from the human, and the program of humanisation, that requires the raciology of dehumanisation to valorise and exalt its species-being. Before further exploring the Afrofuturist reading of dehumanisation, I wish to turn to a standard account of the term within critical ethnicity studies. Rey Chow in particular has addressed the question, arguing that critical work around “ethnic subjection” ought to resist dehumanisation. “Ethnicity” has a particular meaning here: it elaborates a raciology that, although no longer operating under its former biological determinism, persists through the signifier of

“ethnicity” as the cultural construction of racism. Drawing upon Etienne Balibar, Chow writes: “From biology, the problematic of racism has been displaced onto the realm of culture, so that it is the insurmountability of cultural identity, or cultural difference, that has become the justification for racist, discriminatory conduct” (2002: 13).¹² Ethnicity is thus “an otherness, a foreignness that distinguishes it from mainstream, normative society”, but precisely as a socioeconomic construct, “a relation of cultural politics that is regularly enacted by a Westernized, Americanized audience [or any majoritarian *socius*] with regards to those who are perceived and labeled as ethnic” (2002: 22). The socioeconomic construction of the “ethnic”, one aided by the nation-state regimes that separate “legal” from “illegal” immigration, in which migrants are classified through class, “race”, and personal wealth, brings us to the question of dehumanisation. Chow writes that

ethnicity continues, yet exceeds, the paradigm of the meticulous elaboration of the vicissitudes of the individual subject, on the one hand, and the paradigm of humanistic opposition against the rationalization and systematization of human labor under capitalism, on the other. Any consideration of ethnic subjection would therefore need to and continue to “resist” their dehumanizing objectification (Chow 2002: 32–33).

It is, of course, understandable in Chow’s theoretical context that dehumanisation and “depersonalization” are the negative and “inevitable effects” of “collective commodification” (2002: 32). Because of their *inevitability*, however, Chow argues that the more general operations of objectification and stereotyping “remain to be understood in their persistence and ubiquity, often in ways that surprise us” (2002: 50). What is interesting is how Chow deconstructs the role of the stereotype, arguing for the necessity of stereotyping in constructing “others” as a matter of cultural perception (2002: 52–61). In

12. “Nation”, in the production of ethnonationalism, is also an axis of Balibar’s critique; along with a general schema of fascism, this axis is also at the core of Gilroy’s critique of black nationalism (see Gilroy 2004).

short, the stereotype cannot be simply erased from the picture, as it is the objectifying process of stereotyping that enframes the object/other itself. Stereotypes cannot be eradicated, but can be countered, as well as deconstructed; they can contain and communicate positive as well as negative valences:

I believe it is only by considering stereotyping as an objective, normative practice that is regularly adopted for collective purposes of control and management, or even for purposes of epistemological experimentation and radicalism, and not merely as a subjective, devious state of mind that we can begin to assess its aesthetic-cum-political relevance (Chow 2002: 54).

My point here is that, for Chow, dehumanisation takes on the negative inflection that “stereotypes” hold for others. In Chow’s text, dehumanisation remains an unthought sign for the evil that lies at the business end of objectification, commodification, and stereotyping, “the obvious dehumanisation that accompanies the objectification of ethnicity” (2002: 50). It is precisely here, with the invocation of an “*obvious* dehumanisation”, that the term is not obvious but obscured, given the deconstructive potential available in the conditionality of the stereotype: while the negative valences of dehumanisation are obvious enough, what of the meaning carried within its signifier that suggest alternative inflections of post-Enlightenment and post-humanist trajectories?

The opening for such a reading within Chow’s argument is also present in an earlier, economic aspect of her analysis, where she considers the economic production of ethnicity and its subsumption under capital as a product. Ethnicity is commodified as a thing. Ethnicity isn’t only packaged and sold, but “ethnics” are, *tout court*, *produced* as commodities. The institution of slavery, here, is of course exemplary as the production of the subject \$. But in the 21st century, commercialised ethnicity is not only identifiably exploitative, but functions as an ideology under capitalism, wherein “commercial

transactions of ethnic bodies . . . become not merely exploitative . . . but also a morally justified course of action that helps free the other and confirm our own moral superiority” (2002: 23). This moralistic logic of capitalism, which in the past has gone by the unpoetic phrase “the white man’s burden”, also underlies the paternalism of slavery. Here, again, dehumanisation appears in the commodification of a proto-ethnicity, precisely because commodification requires the dehumanisation of a person to a thing, as the construction of the subject \$ under capitalism. For Chow, however, dehumanisation appears in the “inhuman” logic of capitalism, in which “the ethnic-as-commodity cannot simply be understood within the parameters of an older humanism with its existentialist logic but must be theorized in terms of the forces of an *inhuman*, capitalist logic” (my italics, Chow 2002: 25). But it is not clear that the older humanism, and its existentialist logic, was ever distinct from an “inhuman, capitalist logic”. Existentialist humanism, I would suggest, is the necessary antinomy to constructing the logic of inhuman capitalism. Baucom’s rethinking of modernity as commencing with the Atlantic slave trade likewise resituates the birth of financial capitalism to the initiation of imperialist slavery in the 16th century. Slaves are considered as perishable objects of insurance. They need to be accounted for in the ledgers as well as in the philosophemes that would posit the (“moral”) supremacy of those who owned and sold them. It is the capitalist process of dehumanisation that identifies an always already *thingified* body as the inhuman slave. This thingification, what Baucom calls the subject \$, or Chow, the ethnic-as-commodity, operates as a general raciological structure *before* the introduction of biological or cultural racism proper. It is the latter’s condition of possibility. It is existentialist humanism, or rather Enlightenment humanism in general, that has constructed the discourse of the Master from which the Slave has been “dehumanised” — to the point where, in Hegel, the African slave is not even worthy of the dialectical

relation, falling out of History altogether.

The traditional, or rather Marxian and historically linear view on the relationship of slavery to racism is expressed by Wade Davis, who writes that “Slavery was not born of racism; rather, racism was the consequence of slavery” (1985: 191). This is certainly the case in regards to the invention of “racism” as a pseudo-science in the 19th century, as Foucault notes (2003). Davis draws attention to how “forced labor was the foundation of an economic system that knew no color boundaries”, noting the importation of lower-class European whites and the exploitation of aboriginals before the importation of West Africans, who were abducted “not because they were black, but because they were cheap, limitless in number, and better” (1985: 191). Yet the general raciological coordinates are already at work as conditions of possibility; they have just not yet been epidermalised and mapped to colour-coded bodies: rather, bodies are already commodified in a general raciology, the specificities of which will be developed into ever-evolving ideological racisms. What I here call raciology is a discourse — a set of signifying practices that is in reciprocal relation to material practices, power relations, and (technical) forces — that produces the hierarchical differentiation of masters to slaves, subjects to objects, and in which the thingified is the commodity, the subject \$. This apparently anachronistic schema is what Baucom calls, after Benjamin and Halpern, allegorisation as an “epistemological condition of possibility” for the commodification that exceeds it in “mature capitalism” (2005: 21). The commodity of the subject \$ is “practical allegory — allegory in the sphere of social practice” (Halpern 1997: 13). It is through this reconsideration, or rather chronopolitics, that the problematic of a conceptual and terminological anachronism is also addressed, of a racism *avant la lettre*, in which raciology operates before the invention of its formalised pseudo-science. In *Race, Empire, and the Idea of Human*

Development, Thomas McCarthy argues that “Kant, who developed what is arguably the philosophically purest version of European humanism, also developed what is arguably the most systematic theory of race and racial hierarchy prior to the nineteenth century” (2009: 26). Thus in Kant we have the “chief characteristics of a nineteenth-century racial ‘science’” centuries prior to its supposed invention, where “racial characteristics were represented as biologically inherited determinants of differences in talent and temperament” (2009: 26). Such observations challenge templates that would think racism as but a later blight upon modernity and its Enlightenment humanism. When Armageddon been-in-effect, the birth dates of history demand to be thought again: the chronopolitical approach I trace here also leads to a speculative questioning as to whether Foucault’s concept of biopower, which he argues is developed in the 19th century as reciprocal to racism, is not already in operation centuries earlier, its organisation to be found in the “state enterprises” of slavery and its finance capital, organisation of insurance, shipping, lists, medicalisation, and allotment of death for a certain segment of a population deemed disposable, in the general epistemological condition of raciology.

To Chow’s point, then, must be made a subtle complication of her thesis: the ethnic-as-commodity emerges as but the ongoing modulation of an “inhuman capitalism” whose coordinates are those of the the enslaved subject \$. The ultimate commodification of the enslaved subject \$ produced an object of accounting and insurance but also the “philosophical” antinomy of the supremacist human.

“Existentialist humanism” cannot be excluded from the analysis nor consigned to history precisely because “humanism”, alongside inhuman capitalism, persists as the master discourse. Inhuman capitalism does not overcome such Enlightenment humanism, nor render it obsolete, but rather requires it. It functions as an ideology: as the moralising force that allows one to call for resistance to

dehumanisation even as it is humanism that perpetuates the schema of the latter. This ideological function of a persistent, a priori humanism is precisely why Chow identifies the “obvious dehumanisation” that must be “resisted”. But should it be resisted through the discourse of the humanism that co-signs its conditions of possibility, thus ensuring the perpetuation of the master discourse of the human, or is it not the category and concept of the “human” itself that calls for its “resistance”? It is this latter point that Afrofuturism entertains, in a strategic questioning of the value of the human.

If, as Baucom has argued, it is the slave that inaugurates the modern subject as the object of capital, in the financial invention of credit and insurance for the Atlantic slave trade (2005: 55–56), then the “ethnic-as-commodity” is but the slave rewritten under conditions of contemporary capitalism, a capitalism that has nonetheless always required the specieontological division between its Master humans and its inhuman Slaves. Racism is thus not the epiphenomenon of underlying social processes, as Thomas McCarthy argues in tracing the “alternative tradition” of critical race theory through W. E. B. Du Bois, but an “irreducible dimension of social, cultural, and political relations in the modern world” (2009: 24) — granted that the birth of the “modern” has likewise been rethought as coterminous to the commencement of Atlantic slavery. “In short”, McCarthy writes, “there was a continuous interplay between colonialism and racism, between the establishment of imperial domination and the spread of racial ideologies” (2009: 24), an interplay that persists to this day despite the theoretical deconstruction of biological racism, in the ongoing mutation of raciology into “cultural” and “ethnic” racisms.¹³

While addressing the valences of dehumanisation — its prospective operation as an exit strategy

13. As McCarthy also points out, “most of the classical modern theorists were aware of and complicit in the emerging system of white supremacy” (2009: 25). McCarthy details how John Locke owned shares in the Royal African (slave-trading) Company while calling America a “vacant land” occupied only by “nomadic savages”.

from the overdeterminations of the human — I remain sensitive to Chow’s critical approach, which is to elaborate “an argument that is equally responsive to the materiality of ethnicity *and* to the materiality of representation” (2002: 52). The materialisation of practices, even when these take place, as Gilroy observes, in the construction of raciology through language, remains all the more important, precisely because a “posthumanist” reading of dehumanisation must be emphasised as not abandoning the material *body*, but rather as transforming it. Afrofuturist “posthumanism” transforms the discourses that position and construct the human as the assumed a priori of species-being. “Species-being” itself is an inadequate designation, insofar as it assumes a *species* as well as a static ontology: a *being*. Species enacts a further displacement within the coordinates of raciology, displacing racism first from biology to culture and *ethnos*, and second to species. With species, the category of “race” is replayed in the distinction of the “human” species from the “animal”.¹⁴ The Afrofuturist tendency is explicitly toward an unhumanist *becoming*. In this case, what I wish to explore is precisely the materiality of dehumanisation as a radical strategy of destabilising the human/inhuman schema.

To recapitulate a few of this chapter’s primary aims: in considering the Afrofuturist deconstruction of dehumanisation, we need to reflect upon not just a destructive process in which the human is reduced to bare life,¹⁵ but in which something other to the human is capable of emergence, something other and alien capable of challenging the coordinates that advance the supposed supremacy of the human. Such an other-becoming is not only historically with us, in its Afrofuturist inflections, but suggests ways, at least at the level of transformation (an individuation that is always intersubjective and collective), to

14. As footnoted above, see (Derrida 2009, 2011, 2008; Wolfe 2003; Haraway 2004b).

15. I here shadow critique Agamben’s *Homo Sacer* (1998), not for its description of what might be called “industrialized dehumanisation” (or tracing the mechanisms and discourses of biopolitics), but for not addressing the avenues of escape already produced *from within* such conditions of “bare life”. However, this footnote remains a shadow critique as the latter is not Agamben’s project. It is rather the reception of Agamben’s work I critique, in which numerous, melancholic incantations of “bare life” crescendo in a general wail that echoes Nietzsche’s Last Man.

sidestep the categorisation of life into the quantifiable camps of animals and things, tools, labour, and statistics, and above all, *means*, while, in that supposedly exceptional singularity, the human remains within its fortified encampment as the sole “end unto itself”.

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The Afrofuturist trajectory calls for a reconceptualisation of the usual understandings of what it means to be human. Yet this trajectory begins with a series of historical events, and a historical unfolding rightfully understood as one of suffering, of forced dehumanisation on a mass scale. How does a people cope with dehumanisation, with what historian Eugene D. Genovese calls the “naked power” of slavery (1976)? How can we understand dehumanisation as a condition of possibility for Afrofuturist efforts to imaginatively remake or, at the limit, creatively abandon the category of the human? What are the effects of such an abandonment? What futures are revealed in its un-humanist exodus?

In what follows, I will analyse two fundamental divergences that follow the event of “dehumanisation” wrought by slavery: one path that rejects dehumanisation, and struggles for the right to humanity, exhibited in strains of Afrocentrism;¹⁶ the other, explored through Afrofuturism, that remakes, if not rejects, the category of the human entirely.¹⁷

16. Though I do not develop this analysis here, it is evident that the struggle for Civil Rights, in its fight for legal and political equality for discriminated subjects, does so within the framework of the “universal rights of man”. This is not to say, however, that the Civil Rights “movement”, or positions within it, need to invest within the Enlightenment category of the human, or that Afrofuturist positions would reject the gains (or position themselves against) Civil Rights. In short, there is a distinction to be made between strategies and tactics, between the Afrofuturist *strategy* of rejecting the category of the human, and the *tactics* involved in securing juridico-political and legal equalities. This chapter concerns strategies.

17. In drafting a hypothesis that considers the conditions for a divergence of “strategies”, there arises the temptation of reading historical texts as tracing diachronic lineages. Though most diachronic analyses are today complicated in numerous ways, in previous decades its force has held sway: Marxist theorists and (American) Communist Party members James E. Jackson and Claude Lightfoot characterised the Nation of Islam, for example, as “a conditioned reflex to white chauvinism”, a response to “Jim Crow, job discrimination, and the social isolation of the ghetto” (Marable 2011: 284).

Manifests of Afrocentrism

There is no one Afrocentrism: the shades and inflections of Afrocentric perspectives call for a nuanced reading that takes into consideration the context of Afrocentric historical revisionism and racialological solidarities, on the one channel, and the need for alternatives to Eurocentrisms that masquerade as objectivity, on the other. Often the two trajectories are intermixed in the Afrocentric project. Afrocentrism, to quote Molefi Kente Asante in his *An Afrocentric Manifesto*, “is a paradigmatic intellectual perspective that privileges African agency within the context of African history and cultural transcontinentally and trans-generationally” (2007: 2). As Asante points out, the very suggestion that an alternate centre is posited, a “locative thesis [that] does not adapt to the overarching ideas of a European hegemony”, makes some scholars “nervous” (2007: 3). Polemics against Afrocentrism have labeled its project as “racist, reactionary, and essentially therapeutic” (Walker 2001: 3). The core of these debates centre around claims to historical authenticity, and the role that “Africa” and the “African” has played in the development of Kemetian (ancient Egyptian) civilization and the birth of Greek philosophy. At the very heart of this polemic (on both sides), each side of which accuses the other of biased and inaccurate scholarship,¹⁸ is a polemic over classifying and categorising, claiming, and above all, owning, *who it was* that achieved pyramidal civilisation, *who it was* that developed the tenets of philosophy, and so forth. Such a debate requires, of course, pronouncing a discourse of ethnonationalism (in which “Africa” forms the imaginary nation-state of the black continent, “Greece” that of the — assumably de facto white —

18. A perpetual charge of Greek scholars is that of historical inaccuracy in the Afrocentric project. Mary Lefkowitz, a prominent critic of Afrocentrism, charges that George M. James did not turn to “standard accounts” of history but rather focused on “Masonic” sources such as the Reverend Charles H. Vail’s *The Ancient Mysteries and Modern Masonry* [1909] (1997: 94). Turning to the (supposedly?) Egyptian texts of Hermes, Lefkowitz is concerned with sources and forgeries: the 42 books of Hermes, for example, “were forgeries in the modern sense . . . a type of historical fiction” written by Greek authors who “pretended” to be Egyptian because “the highest compliment that [the Greeks] could pay to another civilization was to show that it had in some way inspired the Greek ideas and practices that they admired” (1997: 103). Is this not also saying that Greek culture forged its own origins by revisioning the Egyptians? If this is the case, what should one make of *Greek philosophy but that it is also such a forgery*? Again, one is at the heart of MythScience.

“West”), and forcing such an ethnonationalist identity into a history that had yet to see the invention of the nation-state or that of “race”.¹⁹ This also goes for critics of Afrocentrism, who often claim that they are (in the words of Afrocentric critic Mary Lefkowitz) “defending academic standards” (1997: xvi). While “academic standards” are apparently objective and free of racialised discourse, Afrocentricism “regard[s] history as a form of fiction”, and so “the Afrocentric myth of ancient history is a myth, and not history” (Lefkowitz 1997: xiv, xvi).²⁰ Lefkowitz groups Afrocentrism as part of the “intellectual climate” of “postmodernism” in which history “can and should be written differently by each nation or ethnic group” (1997: xiv). However, Lefkowitz’s characterisation of Afrocentrism as “ethnic” and “nationalist” — as the other to an objective scholarship that apparently is neither — ignores the incisive, and I contend, unavoidable critique demonstrated by critical historiography (what Lefkowitz brands as “postmodern[ism]”): that the production of “objective” history has been so thoroughly inscribed within the progress narratives of Euro- and Americocentrism that its ethnonationalism has become hegemonic.²¹ Missing the opportunity to engage with the challenges proffered by Afrocentrism, Lefkowitz refuses to cede any ground to critiques that, rightly or wrongly, see her work as recapitulating the master discourse of that great, invisible, whitewashed imperialism upon which all other

19. There are, of course, other historiographical perspectives that are not strategically bound to ethnonationalist encampments. However, my intent here is to trace the debate around Afrocentrism, not to catalogue the inventory of approaches to Africanist history. For an example of the latter, see the work of Allen Isaacman, who has written extensively on identity, economic production and resistances to colonialism, focusing on Mozambique in particular (1995; 1983; 2004). However, it should be noted that Allen’s histories are not concerned with discerning the *ancient origins of Greece* or the role that “Africa” had in (in)forming “Greek” philosophy.

20. This claim is becomes all the more complicated when one of the main arguments of Lefkowitz is that the *Greeks fictionalised their own Egyptian (pre)history* (see footnote above) (1997: 99–105). If this is the case, then it is just as much argument for Afrocentrists to suggest that *Greek philosophy is also such a fiction*. It also leads to a destabilisation of the entire field of ancient thought: where, precisely, is the “historical truth” differentiated from its “myth”? Though Lefkowitz would undoubtedly answer it is the task of the modern historian to tease out one from the other, that this teasing continues to focus on Graecophilia in one camp, Afrocentrism in the other, suggests that certain “myths” of “doing history” are still very much in operation.

21. For example the many inquiries by Foucault that have sought to discern how a society produces discourses about itself (1990; 2010). See also Derrida’s critiques of “historicity”, “white mythology” and of “ethnocentric anthropology” in *Of Grammatology* (1997). And in general, the paradigm of paradigms, Thomas Kuhn’s *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (2012) and Paul Feyerabend’s *Against Method* (2010). I characterise these approaches as “critical historiography”. Others might call them “postmodern historiography”.

ethnonationalisms, or differences in general, are painted as “other”. The particulars of such debates rage at the molecular level. In the thick of the content, positions are staked around the imaginary ethnonationalist borders of empires and their racialised subjects,²² scrabbling over the shades of colour attributed to the Pharaohs,²³ the possible Africanist descent of Socrates,²⁴ and the epidermalisation of other ancient figures, while one of the most contentious issues — whether Kemet is at the “origin” of Greek philosophy, and whether the latter’s discourses were “stolen” from the ancient Egyptians (James 2001) — conscripts phenotypes as well as philosophical concepts,²⁵ on both sides, to ethnonationalisms. While the Afrocentrist Cheikh Anta Diop infamously wields Herodotus against the whitewashed assumptions of Graecophilia,²⁶ its greatest critic, Mary Lefkowitz expresses shock that Afrocentrism

22. The title of Lefkowitz’s first critique of Bernal is entitled *Not Out of Africa* (1997), thus replicating the very geohistoriographical containment of ethnonationalism identified by Molefi Kete Asante, the latter who writes of how “Some authors, such as Charles F. Aling in *Egypt and Bible History* (1992), argue that Egypt is somewhere outside of Africa. This, of course, is an anti-African viewpoint of Egyptian history and culture” (2000: vi). Lines in the sand.

23. An historico-anthropological contention of Cheikh Anta Diop’s: that, for example, Narmer (or Menes), was a “typical Negro, first Pharaoh of Egypt . . . he is assuredly neither Aryan, Indo-European, nor Semitic, but unquestionably Black” (1974: fig. 5, 13).

24. There is endless Afrocentric speculation on Socrates’ depiction in the *Symposium*: “Isn’t [Socrates] just like the statue of Silenus?”, asks Alcibiades (Plato 1997: 497 [215b]). Alcibiades is comparing Socrates to a Satyr who looked sometimes like a horse. Xenophon’s *Oeconomicus* [~362 BC] contains another speculative description during a Beauty contest between Socrates and Critobulus (son of Crito): Socrates says his nose bridge isn’t high and nose not straight (6, 9, 10) as Critobulus’ but “spread out wide and flat”, (5, 13, 14), a “snub nose” (2, 3, 5, 7, 8, 11–9); unlike Critobulus, Socrates has “thick lips” (5, 11, 13, 14). We are once again waging physiognomy and phenotypes. But what is also interesting is Lefkowitz’s response: the very *idea* that Socrates could be black, mentioned on the first page: “There were books in circulation that claimed that Socrates and Cleopatra were of African descent” (1997: xi). I am curious to know how Cleopatra could not be considered “of African descent”. Is Egypt “in or out” of “Africa”? In an article in the *Times Literary Supplement*, describing an “Ancient Egypt and Nubia” exhibit at the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, John Ray reminds us that “A large part of what we consider to be Ancient Egypt lies nowadays in the northern Sudan. . . . Pharaoh Taharqa (690–664BC), who ruled Egypt as well as most of Nubia, and who features in the Bible in the Second Book of Kings . . . was Nubian by origin” (2012). In short, Taharqa was black. For Ray, who presents no Afrocentrist polemic in his exhibition review, Egypt is “in” Africa.

25. Lefkowitz makes significant assumptions as to what constitutes “Greek philosophy”. In her critique of the Hermes texts, she writes that “the forty-two books of Hermes . . . do not seem to be concerned with the kind of abstract problems that the Greeks dealt with in their philosophical writings. Rather [the books] seem to contain practical information and regulations, specific to Egyptian religion” (1997). Note the uncritical assumption of a division between philosophy and religion and of what, to begin with, constitutes “philosophy”. This distinction echoes Hegel’s in *The Philosophy of History*: “The grade of culture [which is to say lack thereof] which the Negroes occupy may be more nearly appreciated by considering the aspect which *Religion* presents among them” (1991: 93). The “Negroes” have religion, but not culture or philosophy. Moreover, the fragments of what constitute “pre-Socratic philosophy”, and the manifold of interpretations of them (including the most radical: those of Heidegger (see 2000)), often suggest their *practice* in a “religious” context (in particular, what we know of Pythagoras). Bernal picks up on such cues. Was Pythagoreanism a philosophy or religion? What, precisely, is the difference? A citation from his text suggests the complexity of his analysis: Bernal argues that the Greek figure of Orpheus derives from the Egyptian (‘I)rp’t (Orpais), the title given to the Egyptian god Geb, a deity of earth and the Underworld. Orphism, writes Bernal, “was established [in Greece] in the 6th century [BC] in close conjunction with Pythagoreanism . . . The Orphic and Pythagorean emphasis on metempsychosis — the transmigration of souls — and the lined vegetarianism were also current among Egyptian priests in Hellenistic and Roman times” (2002: 71–72). Are physical practices, or cultivations of the body, *de jure* religions? Or are these the performance of the “abstract problems” that philosophy apparently is?

denies that “the ancient Greeks were the inventors of democracy, philosophy, and science” or that “Socrates and Cleopatra were [possibly] of African descent” (Lefkowitz 1997: xi).

I would like to suggest, in an Afrofuturist mode, that the production of MythScience is wielded on both sides, though perhaps with a more explicit force, and for more evidently political reasons, in Afrocentrism. In the Graecophilic discourses, “academic standards” mask the potential for criticism of buried ethnonationalist assumptions. How can one even speak of “Greece” in an age of semi-autonomous city-states? Discourses on both sides of the polemic share considerable assumptions concerning “cultural” containment, agreeing more on the underlying raciological form of their claims than disagreeing at the level of their content. The underlying structure of both Afrocentrism and Eurocentrism, *even when Eurocentrism does not announce itself but rather proceeds by way of an invisible, hegemonic whiteness*, is an implicit or explicit raciology: a discourse that produces signs of hierarchically differentiated distinctions between ethnonationalist enclaves. Afrocentric raciology is, perhaps, the more identifiable, but only because it announces itself. Diop’s *Civilization or Barbarism: An Authentic Anthropology*, everywhere marks the “Yellow”, “Alpine”, and “Black” races in its quest for the authenticity of its anthropos (1991). Thus, “humanity was born in Africa and differentiated itself into several races in Europe, where the climate was sufficiently cold at the end of Würmian glaciation” (Diop 1991: 16). For Diop, race, even in post-geographical dispersions, cannot be eschewed. Daily facts prohibit doing so:

Certainly, the dilution of the human species’ genes during prehistoric times is very important; but from there to deny race, in the sense that it impacts on history and on social relations, meaning at the phenotypical level, which is of interest solely to the historian and to the sociologist, is a step

26. From the very beginning of *The African Origin of Civilization: Myth Or Reality*, “Eyewitnesses of the period formally affirm that the Egyptians were Blacks. In several occasions Herodotus insists on the Negro character of the Egyptians” (Diop 1974: 1).

that the daily facts of life prohibit anyone from taking (Diop 1991: 17).

The distribution of phenotype remains the unitary element of race — its “epidermalisation” — precisely because of its *political* authenticity. Diop offers both the biological argument for race — in the previous paragraph, he discusses “hereditary defects” as evidence of its *science* — as well as the sociohistorical construction of what Chow would call “ethnicity”. It is because assumptions of a phenotypical essentialism impact social relations that the latter justifies the perpetuation of epidermalisation. But above all, it is because race is reified in “daily facts of life” that it exists as precisely such a *fact*. The argument is, as all raciologies, viciously circular. Martinican psychologist, anticolonial theorist and member of the Algerian National Liberation Front (FLN) Frantz Fanon well theorised the effects of such circularity in *Black Skin, White Masks*. Encountering the “neurotic” tautologies of racism, Fanon observed that he “was up against something irrational” (2008: 98). Raciology has its own rationality, yet everywhere defeats it.

Afrocentric positions, however, explicitly leverage Africanised difference to combat Eurocentrism. Consequently, they have been critiqued by contemporary scholars for exhibiting such unseemly but strategic raciology. Paul Gilroy argues that “the authoritarian and proto-fascist formations of twentieth-century black political culture [the Nation of Islam, the Universal Negro Improvement Association, and the Black Panthers] have been animated by an intense desire to recover the lost glories of the African past” (2004: 333). Gilroy points out that such a “complex archaism [is] so powerful that it can oppose capitalism while remaining utterly alien to democracy” (2004: 333). Therein lies its dangerous ambiguity as much as its potential, as the creative challenge to received ideas could also chart new futurologies. Fanon foresaw how foreclosing such a futurology by shuttering revisionings of the past

results in stasis, despair, inferiority, and rage. In the impressionistic and intense chapter “The Lived Experience of the Black Man” in *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon arrives at Negritude, the celebration of blackness in the Senegalese poet Léopold Sédar Senghor, and the texts of Martinican theorist and poet Aimé Césaire, whom he quotes at length, as Fanon has “finally made up [his] mind to shout my blackness” (2008: 101). Rational argument against irrational raciology had failed. Therein lies the basis for Negritude, i.e., for the exuberant irrationality (however cloaked in rationality) of Afrocentrism:

I had rationalized the world, and the world had rejected me in the name of color prejudice. Since there was no way we could agree on the basis of reason, I resorted to irrationality. It was up to the white man to be more irrational than I (Fanon 2008: 102).

This turn to a celebration of black magic, animism, animal eroticism, rhythm, and the “cosmic message” of the drums (2008: 103–05) leads Fanon in a “frenzy” to excavate “black antiquity”, a discovery that leaves him “speechless”, in which he realises: “the white man was wrong, I was not a primitive or subhuman; I belonged to a race that had already been working silver and gold 2,000 years ago” (2008: 109). Fanon’s celebration of Negritude, however, comes crashing down when faced with Sartre. It is Sartre, a “friend of the colored peoples . . . this born Hegelian”, who argues that Negritude is but the negative moment of a historical dialectic toward a postracial society (Fanon 2008: 112). “Negritude appears as the weak stage of a dialectical progression”, writes Sartre in *Black Orpheus*,

the theoretical and practical affirmation of white supremacy is the thesis; the position of Negritude as antithetical value is the moment of negativity. But this negative moment is not sufficient in itself and the Blacks who employ it well know it; they know that it serves to pave the way for the synthesis or the realization of the human society without race. Thus Negritude is dedicated to its own destruction, it is transition and not result, a means and not the ultimate goal

(Sartre, in Fanon 2008: 112).

Fanon replies incisively. Sartre, he points out, “has robbed me of my last chance” (2008: 112). This chance is not simply that of an emotional outlet: it is that “when I tried to claim my negritude *intellectually as a concept*, they snatched it away from me” (my italics Fanon 2008: 111). It is the *concept* of Negritude itself — of an affirmative Afrocentricity that articulates an ontology, aesthetics, phenomenology, historicity, and politics — that has been negated. Sartre’s “mistakes”, for Fanon, are many: Sartre ignores what might be called the *event* of consciousness, that “consciousness needs to get lost in the night of the absolute, the only condition for attaining self-consciousness” (Fanon 2008: 112). Such negativity, argues Fanon, is not insufficient in-itself, but “draws its value from a virtually substantial absolutuity [*absoluité*]”, a “black consciousness [that] claims to be an absolute density, full of itself, a stage pre-existent to any opening, to any abolition of the self by desire” (2008: 113). “Black” consciousness, implies Fanon, is no more drained of absolutuity than that of *white* consciousness. But what is meant here by absolutuity? The absolutuity of consciousness, I suggest, is not to be found so much in the supposition of an absolute, positive content, unchangeable and unchanged, as the absolutuity of its temporal rupture, its “impulsiveness”, which is to say, its *futurity*. The absolutuity of consciousness, for Fanon, is absolute only in its unforeseeability.²⁷ Sartre, writes Fanon, “should have opposed the unforeseeable to historical destiny” (2008: 113). Sartre’s dialectical teleology forecloses the future; it negates an Afro-futurology that would rewrite “(self-)consciousness” in the *concept* of Negritude, where Negritude does not contain itself to an

27. The tendencies of Fanon’s text to think the absolutuity of “black” consciousness as unchangeable content are, in later writings, definitively questioned, where Fanon writes of Negritude as a “black mirage” replacing the “great white mistake” (in Macey 2012: 184). But the phrase “absolute density” can perhaps be interpreted as already tending toward an Afrofuturist trajectory: the point of absolute density is a singularity, a “black hole”. Consciousness as absolute density is a singularity containing nothing, yet exerting force upon space and time to the extent that it warps both. Beyond the event horizon, the unforeseeable future is pulled into the singularity of absolute density.

absolute content, but to the absoluteness of an unforeseeability, an impulsiveness of its absolute density. Sartre's "intellectualization of black *existence*", argues Fanon, casts blackness as an "amputation" that Fanon, "with all [his] being", *refuses* to accept: "I feel my soul as vast as the world, truly a soul as deep as the deepest of rivers; my chest has the power to expand to infinity" (Fanon 2008: 113–19). Fanon's refusal also rejects the imposition of guilt for-being-black, and so he exploits the only avenue left: violence: "The black man is a toy in the hands of the white man. So in order to break the vicious circle, he explodes" (Fanon 2008: 119).²⁸

Contrary to Gilroy's thesis, then, it is not Afrocentrism, or Negritude, that is the basis of black militancy and its authoritarian and proto-fascist formations.²⁹ This could be argued on historical grounds. Black nationalism, Afrocentrism and Negritude exist simultaneously: black nationalism had already organised itself on a large scale with Marcus Garvey and the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) from 1914 through the 1920s. Afrocentrism and Negritude grouped around the First International Congress of Black Writers and Artists in 1956. My counterpoint, however, is theoretical, which is to say, synchronic: it is that expressions of "Afrocentrism" or "Negritude" cannot simply be read as but "causes" of black nationalism. One does *not* necessarily imply the other. If anything, I am tempted to place Fanon's thesis as the inverse to Gilroy's: black militancy, black power, black rage is the *effect* of short-circuiting "Negritude". It is its explosion.

28. I do not address here Fanon's critique of Hegel's master/slave dialectic and his positing of the intersubjective relationship between the colonised/coloniser, as later developed in *The Wretched of the Earth* (2004). This is not to ignore the utility and force of Fanon's theory of colonialist intersubjectivity. However my purpose here is to read Fanon's volatile *Black Skin, White Masks* for the intensities and frustrations in which uncertain and unforeseeable *paths* are revealed, tangents toward an "absoluteness" of *futurity* that grapple with the question of praxis, namely, the place of violence as painted against the unfolding of the unknown.

29. In making this claim I see Negritude and Afrocentrism as commensurate. The writers and poets associated with Negritude as well as the work of Afrocentrist scholar Cheikh Anta Diop were published in the Paris-based magazine *Présence Africaine* (1947–), founded by Alioune Diop. In 1956, Alioune Diop organized the First International Congress of Black Writers and Artists in Paris, which included Aimé Césaire, Léopold Sédar Senghor, Jacques Rabemananjara, Cheikh Anta Diop, Richard Wright, Frantz Fanon, and Jean Price-Mars (and for which Pablo Picasso designed a poster). These two movements are connected on multiple levels.

But such raciological positions are, of course, not foreign to Eurocentrism. Afrocentrism would not exist without its globalised counterpart. In this, Sartre is correct: it is because of the planetary pestilence of white supremacy that Eurocentrism has become the default stage of normality from which any deviation is a “bias”. The hegemonic status of Eurocentrism infects *the very production of Afrocentricity*. Contrary to Asante’s assertion that Afrocentricity is “not a European idea”, the very idea of ethnonationalism, and of the scientific “fact” of “race” as well as its sociohistorical reification, remains a dubiously European invention.³⁰ In the next chapter, I will turn to equally infamous passages from Hegel’s *Philosophy of History* that connect “race” to geographical determinism and (in Diop’s words) “genetic stock” (1991: 17). Asante’s assertion that Afrocentricity is not “a European idea”, however, requires the containmant of cultures and the sealing of one particular discourse from another, a hermetic capability that denies any diasporic and collectively intersubjective processes of belonging. It thus repeats the very gesture of Eurocentrism: that it purely stands alone against the other. But more strangely, perhaps, is that Asante, writing in 2007, argues that Eurocentrism — as Afrocentrism — cannot be critical of its own project. Thus Afrocentrism is not a European idea, “because, for it to be, it would mean that Europe would be assaulting its own patriarchy and sense of superiority in language, content, and structure” (Asante 2007: 3). Besides the oddity of such a statement (one that appears to deny the postcolonial, poststructural, and deconstructive movements of the past forty years that critique the structuration of *both* raciologies), is its implicit, and inverse, assumption: that no true Afrocentrism

30. Even if the general structure of raciology is not: that various practices of slavery have existed throughout history is not in question, nor that West African societies already practiced forms of conflict slavery before the arrival of Europeans (and were complicit in, and vastly profited from, the capture of slaves;). Standard (which is to say European) theories of ancient Egypt also suggest the construction of the pyramids using slave labour, though Afrocentric but also alternative accounts stress, at least with the older pyramids (the Great Pyramid and those of the Giza Plateau) a significantly more ancient and organised society, wherein pyramids were constructed through (black) secret technologies all but lost to the modern world. The increasing validity of this thesis, as carbon dating and other forms of astronomical dating suggest, alongside better understandings of the technological innovation of pyramidal construction and the possible uses for the many pyramids which were *not* tombs, and in which know Pharaohs were found, is interesting.

would ever critique its own sense of superiority, either. And this is the troubled position of an Afrocentrism, one shared by a persistent, hegemonic, and invisible Eurocentrism, both of which refuse to shift beyond the conceptual straightjacket of raciology. But can one imagine an Afrocentrism without raciology? It is with that question that one encounters an Afrofuturism, as well as Afrofuturist strains within the chronopolitics and science fictional strands of Afrocentrism.

But first, Afrocentrism must nonetheless be contextualised as well as critiqued.

The Historical Concept(s) of Afrocentricity

Without a black past, without a black future, it was impossible for me to live my blackness. Not yet white, no longer completely black, I was damned.

— Frantz Fanon (2008: 117)

The contours of Afrocentrism, as an expressed idea, have been outlined above. I would like to further refine its differentiations by focusing on two of its most contested texts: George G.M. James' *Stolen Legacy* [1954], on the one channel, and the critical debates engendered by the likes of Martin Bernal in *Black Athena: The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization* [1987], on the other. I turn to James' text because of its canonical place in Afrocentricity as the blueprint of an argument that, though it has been significantly refined, underpins Bernal's later work in excavating black antiquity. James' suspect and uncritical use of occult sources and Masonic texts that reveal the "secret" of how Greece "stole" its philosophy from ancient Egypt has undermined its erstwhile value — as an alternative accounting or critique of Eurocentric narratives — for many historians. (see Lefkowitz 1997: xiv–v). Yet *Stolen Legacy* can be read as an-other kind of text: as the aesthetic and imaginative textbook for Afrofuturist

reinventions of Kemet. Along with other rare occult, theosophical, mystical, and Masonic texts, including those of Helena Blavatsky, John Dee, Carl Gustav Jung, and Alice Bailey, *Stolen Legacy* is to be found upon the shelves of Sun Ra's vast library (see Ra 2005b: 481–500; see Szwed 1998). *Legacy* is positioned by Kodwo Eshun as the “blueprint” for Sun Ra's science fictional and “despotic” Kemetian-Afrofuturism, in which

Ra zooms this lost Africa into a lost Pharaohnic Egypt. By reversing this lost African Egypt out of the past, and fastforwarding it out into the interstellar space of Saturn and Plutonia, Ra swaps [Marcus] Garvey's politics of secession, radical at a point when imperial capital demanded reserves of black labour, for a MythScience system assembled from George M. James' New Philosophy of African Redemption in '54's *Stolen Legacy* (Eshun 1999: 09[156]).

The result, for Eshun, is Ra's Pharaohnic posthumanism, in which “Sun Ra looks down on humans with the inhuman indifference and impatience of a Plutonian Pharaoh”, and in which (to replay this sample) “Ra identifies with the Pharaohs, the despots, the ancient oppressors” (1999: 09[154–5]). I believe that Ra's allegiances are more complex than this,³¹ even if he assumes a patriarchal and centralised mode of authority — the Arkestra's thematic “discipline” — by enforcing ascetic conditions of communal existence (see Szwed 1998; Piekut 2011).³²

31. Eshun argues that Ra identifies with Egypt over Israel; in the next chapter I will delve further into *exodus* by demonstrating how Afrofuturism paradoxically — and thus impossibly — embraces both.

32. Ra's patriarchy has been inscribed in popular accounts of Afrofuturism, the latter which has been narrowly defined as “a trend within black popular music, whose paternity is generally attributed to Sun Ra” (van Assche 2002: 21). Like Nabeel Zuberi (2004), I find this definition misleading insofar as it valorises Ra in the role of patriarch. While patriarchy is undeniably at work in Afrofuturism (like all cultural formations, I should add, that traverse these historical periods and movements), Ra, while often emphasizing the *sun* (as metaphor for the singular patriarch), nonetheless also places equal, if not more emphasis on the *outer darkness*, *universe* or *cosmic* in his MythScience. In claiming to be a god, Ra also suggests the Nation of Islam's belief that the “original black man is god”, a principle that is turned into praxis in the Five Percent, where *all* (black) males are “gods”, and women “earths”. Thus the centrality of the “sun” as a *singular sovereignty* is again displaced. The speculative hypothesis here is that Ra's communalist Pharaohnicism references the matriarchal era of Kemet (the “pre-Dynastic”, or pre-patriarchal era), during which alternative historians believe the Sphinx and Great Pyramid were built (anywhere from 5,000 to 12,000 BC, though some go so far as 36,000 BC), and well before the establishment of the orthodox, patriarchal priesthood at Karnak. These are heretic theories, often grouped under “The Orion Correlation Theory” that emphasises the stellar correlation of the Giza Plateau pyramids to Orion's Belt, particularly Sirius (which is where MythScience accelerates: as here one encounters similar ritual significance in the Dogon theosophy). For its Pyramidological hypothesis in Egyptology, see (Bauval 1989). For its subsequent (“New

But what I wish to draw attention to here is how Ra's Kemetianism cannot be so easily traced to the influence of *Stolen Legacy*. Indeed, it may be the inverse. Recently published collections of notes, pamphlets, corner broadsheets, artworks and ephemera from Ra's theosophical and occult study groups — Thmei Research and El Saturn (see Corbett et al. 2006; Ra 2006) — suggest that Ra was already researching ancient black Egypt, as well as developing a Kemetian “cosmic philosophy” in texts and discussions well before James published in 1954. At the very least, James' *Stolen Legacy* follows after several years in which Ra developed a mythology of Afrofuturist Kemetianism and outer-space theosophy. Paul Gilroy makes a similar point; drawing attention to how Helena Blavatsky and Carl Jung “remain largely unacknowledged as influences on the development of the NOI [Nation of Islam] and its theology”, Gilroy speculates that “Blavatsky's work may well have found its way into the consciousness of the young Elijah Poole (Muhammed) through the mystic influence of Sun Ra, the great musician and student of esoterica who had been his contemporary in Chicago” (2004: 331). Moving to Chicago from his hometown of Birmingham, Alabama in 1947, Ra actively partook in street-corner pamphleteering and speechifying of his esoteric readings of the Bible and other occult texts, where according to historian John Szwed, Sun Ra

and his friends heard the Muslims talk in the park, argued with them, and they believed that they had come to influence the Nation of Islam with ideas such as questioning the name which had been given to African peoples in the United States (“so-called Negroes”). Muhammed's idea that “Negro” = “death” Sonny felt was his own. He had discovered that Roger Bacon's book on ceremonial magic was called *De Nigromancia*, and he found in etymology books that the Middle English “nigromancie” had been formed by folk etymology from the Latin “nigro” and had been substituted in Middle Latin for “necro” (dead). He also noted that the Muslims got the idea for

Age”) explorations, see (Bauval 2010).

starting their newspaper, *Muhammed Speaks*, after he had begun distributing his own leaflets, which they had read (Szwed 1998: 106).

Could it be the case that Ra and his Thmei Research / El Saturn collective influenced the theom mythology of the Nation of Islam? Could it be possible that, through circuitous channels, Ra likewise influenced George James? Such hypotheses are entirely speculative. Nonetheless, James, who did not publish until 1954, was evidently tapping into a zeitgeist of which Ra was an early participant and contributor, along with the so-called “black Muslims”. A mix of occult, theosophical, and mystical sources had found different forms and expressions in Chicago and across the United States, fomenting strains of Afrocentricity, Afrofuturism, and the theom mythology of the Nation of Islam, while throughout the colonies and European centres, similar ideas and expressions had coalesced into the Negritude movement, forming various epistemes — poetics, aesthetics, ontologies, philosophies — that challenged “white mythology”.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, then, James’ *Stolen Legacy* is prepared for polemical battle: it is the “explosion”, at the intellectual level, that Fanon warned of (2008: 119). Its argument advances by announcing, in Asante’s approving paraphrase, that “there is no such thing as Greek philosophy, only stolen Egyptian philosophy” (in James 2001: ii). James’ chapter titles are self-explanatory in this respect: “Greek Philosophy Is Stolen From Egyptian Philosophy”; “So-Called Greek Philosophy Was Alien To The Greeks And Their Conditions of Life”. Yet such a text must be handled in its historical context. *Stolen Legacy* was written under the policies of segregation and institutionalised discrimination. Just as Ra could not enter through the “white” door, nor in certain clubs, be visible to the audience, playing hidden behind what he called the “Iron Curtain” (Szwed 1998: 58–59), George James, a professor at the

Pine Bluff African-American college in Arkansas, could not eat at the same table with whites nor sit at the front of the bus. Asante emphasises the historical context in his introduction — “the era of boycotts, the Klu Klux Klan, major Supreme Court hearings, and organized protests”, and to which we might add the rise of Malcolm X (in James 2001: ii). In the battleground of history, *Stolen Legacy* operates as a weapon of antiracist struggle: it upsets the received orders of truth; it calls for a revaluation of all values; it lights dynamite. The stakes of such militant Afrocentrism are made clear by Asante, who writes that

... the best road to all health, economic, political, cultural, and psychological [sic] in the African community is through a centered positioning of ourselves within our own story. We can never be shoved to the side in our own history or relegated to being back-up players to Europeans in the grand drama of humanity. Ours is a remarkable journey of liberation over the past five hundred years. We are on the verge of sanity, often with excursions into insanity from time to time as we try to throw off the vestiges of Europeanized minds (Asante 2003: vii).

I read Asante’s introductory aside here to his book *Afrocentricity* as something of an admission, or at an least insight into the excesses of Afrocentrism: that “excursions into insanity” are a strategic means of historical and political struggle. Fanon explored such irrationality in the face of a rationalising racism that refused to recognise its irrationality. Moreover, such invocations of madness are not singular to Afrocentrism. Besides Nietzsche, similar theses were pronounced by French philosopher Gilles Deleuze and his activist and schizoanalyst compatriot Félix Guattari in *Anti-Oedipus* [1972]: “schizoanalysis must devote itself with all its strength to the necessary destructions. Destroying beliefs and representations, theatrical scenes. And when engaged in this task no activity will be too malevolent” (2000: 314). For Deleuze and Guattari, schizophrenia offered a strategic madness, one that could be utilised to analyse the repressive familial and organisational apparatuses of society. Undertaking

schizoanalysis meant the destruction of such received ideas by invoking a strategic schizophrenia. The strategic intellectual militancy of Afrocentrism is expressed as precisely such an act of destruction: it madly sets fire to the theatre of Eurocentric history, tearing down its beliefs and representations. Such a destructive spark is arguably inseparable from the creative act of revolt.³³

However, I wish to contrast the destructive militancy of James (and like texts) with Martin Bernal's *Black Athena*. Bernal sets out to trace, with substantially greater diligence, the much more complex cultural borrowings at work between the ancient civilizations known today as Egypt and Greece. Because of Bernal's attempt to conduct rigorous argumentation based upon archaeology and the textual archives of history, philosophy, and religion, his work has been all the more fiercely rejected by critics defending the absolute originality of Greece. Yet, Bernal's primary thesis, as that of a more sedate reading of James, is often lost in the ensuing firestorm: would it have been possible for translocal borrowings and cross-cultural movements of ideas, peoples, teachers, and beliefs to *not* have taken place? For originalist assertions deny the very *concept* of diaspora. It is here, I suggest, that one finds the diasporic heart of Afrocentricity, one that, "skinned" of its raciology — or rather as the condition of raciologies that follow — reveals the underlying supposition of an ancient diaspora.

How would the concept of an ancient diaspora impact the pedagogy of Western philosophy? How would it alter its concepts (and especially those of home, earth, ground, and origin)? The explication of even the question, here, and its various inflections, is beyond the scope of this text. However one brief example ought to suffice. Plato narrates various Egyptian origin myths in his dialogues — of writing,

33. While I don't wish to dismiss out of hand Fanon's assessment that "Since the black man has always been treated as inferior, he attempts to react with a superiority complex" (2008: 188), I do disagree with its sole application to "the black man": such a superiority complex is precisely the mechanism of white colonialism and imperialism, as well as feudal systems, absolute monarchies, and despots, among plenty others, which suggests the complexity of what Fanon interprets as a reactionary Narcissism. Such a complex is also crucially necessary for the fury of revolt — or at least, it is found in all such revolts.

mathematics, science — notably in the *Phaedrus*, *Philebus*, *Timaeus*, *Epinomis*, and *Critias*.³⁴ One such myth, that of Egyptian writing (of Theuth/Thoth in the *Phaedrus*), has been read critically but also imaginatively by Derrida to deconstruct the systemic privileging of “living speech” to “dead writing”, a powerful thesis that targets the core tenets of Western metaphysics as a whole (see Derrida 1997; 1981b). Derrida’s gesture also upsets the supposed historical primacy and pure origin of Greek philosophy, the latter a point rarely raised by Derrida’s English commentators, though perhaps more evident in the French intellectual context of Derrida’s “otherness” as a *pied noir* (Algerian “immigrant”) and Franco-Maghrebian Jew (see 1981b). How might Derrida’s project — of reading ancient Egyptian mythology to deconstruct what he, at one time, identifies as the “white mythology” of metaphysics (1984) — be read as *Afrofuturist*? I will turn to this question in the next chapter.

I suggest these paths to illustrate how a strategic Kemetic madness might deconstruct the enduring Graecophilia of Western philosophy. In departing this debate, I wish to draw attention to the charges of constructionism on the part of both Bernal and Lefkowitz. The point — that both historical projects are engaged in MythSciences, in the fictional construction of fact — can be made briefly.

According to Bernal, it was not until the 18th century that Greece was constructed as the privileged site of origin for Western cultural identity: “Racism and ‘progress’ could thus come together in the condemnation of Egyptian/African stagnation and praise of Greek/European dynamism and change” (2002: 190).³⁵

34. Keeping in mind that *Epinomis* is of dubious Platonic authorship. I still find it eye-opening to reflect that, in a decade and a half of studying philosophy in two scholarly institutions, not a single seminar has once mentioned its interesting Egyptian forebearers.

35. Bernal’s point is not that Graecophilia did not previously exist (i.e., as a key aspect of the Renaissance) but that it is in the 18th century that it shapes a discipline (Hellenism), whose historico-philology seeks the origins of Western civilization *in* Greece (see, in particular, Hegel’s *Philosophy of History*). It is just this Hellenistic discipline that Nietzsche, in *The Birth of Tragedy* [1872], sought to overturn from the inside, by opposing Dionysus to Apollo. Marx, for example, also argues that “Plato’s *Republic*, in so far as the division of labour is treated in it as the formative principle of the state, is merely an Athenian idealization of the Egyptian caste system, Egypt having served as the model of an industrial country to others of his contemporaries, e.g. Isocrates. It remained this importance for the Greeks even

As Lefkowitz points out, Bernal's account of the usurpation of Egyptophilia by Greek is far from hegemonic. Moreover, Lefkowitz argues (in a similar vein) for the fictional construction of Egypt as the privileged site of origin for Afrocentrism in the 20th century (1997).

Yet, when pressed, Lefkowitz's critique of Afrocentricity finds itself battling the strategic deployment of historical authenticity — the (raciological) claims to theft of Egyptian thought by Greek — moreso than the more sober claims that emphasise the Egyptian underpinnings of Greek thought. Lefkowitz thus writes how though historical texts speak of "Egyptian *origins*", they do not speak "of deliberate theft on the part of the ancient Greeks" (1997: 92). It would appear, then, that both Bernal and Lefkowitz are conducting similar operations, though from opposite ends: in their negative modes, both are debunking the constructs of historical *mythos*, Egypt and Greece, that have been respectively used for sociopolitical purposes of racialised privilege and power.³⁶ In short, what is at war is a battle of MythSciences: of mythical constructions of origin and facticity, each demonstrating the artifice and constructionism of the other. Might not both be better served by recognising their complementary fictions of historical authenticity, by addressing the *necessity* of MythScience?

All such raciological narratives of authentic origin — including the unspoken invisibility of white hegemony — must maintain a clear epidermal distinction between self and other that persists over time, geographical displacement, miscegenation and the redrawing of affiliations, borders, and allegiances. All

at the time of the Roman Empire" (1990: 488–89). Yet Marx's argument *also* demonstrates one of Bernal's several points, that in Greek texts (though of dubious validity, often quasi-mythical; Marx cites Busirius and Isocrates) Egypt is recognised for providing many of the means and ideas for Greek philosophy. And so wafts an ambiguity marshalled for various wars.

36. I leave aside here the battle over history, in which the interpretation of archeological shards, the etymologies of language, and other such artifacts are waged to establish the veracity of *factum*: taking both positions into account, it would appear reasonable to assume that Greece and Egypt (as well as the entire Mediterranean) had long been a fertile zone of cross-pollinated cultures. *Both* authors appear at pains to establish, beyond a doubt, foundational moments in cultural influence: Greece *or* Egypt. Nonetheless, any such history must handle its commonplace: the very large artifacts known as the pyramids suggest a highly developed mathematics, as well as disciplines (and social orders) of engineering, architecture, and the pragmatics of construction, and a nuanced, if not incredibly powerful theosophical system that was the impetus for building such monuments (either that or one must invest in the New Age/Afrofuturist *mythos*: aliens built them, either long gone or black among us).

such raciocentrism teaches that ethnobiocultural encampments are the same in the past as they are today thanks to the “unique identity” of hereditary epidermalisation, while the nostalgia for this lost and glorious past, thieved by the other, is only matched by the longing for a return to raciocultural supremacy. Yet, as Eshun has explored (2003) and as I outlined in chapter two, such approaches that uncover the supposed raciological authenticity of their claims partake of a politics of quasi-fictionalisation — of chronopolitics — whether explicitly recognised or not.

“This Is Africa”: Diasporic Afrocentrisms

Producing a critique of Afrocentric raciology often does little more than recapitulate a Eurocentricity that trumpets its standards of objectivity and celebrates the triumphalist position of having (supposedly) left raciology in its past. Afrocentrism is a position that avowedly takes Africanist themes, peoples, and history at its centre. It is also a discourse that came of age during struggles for Civil Rights in the overdeveloped world and against European colonialism in the overexploited periphery to imperial empire. Today, it positions its Afrocentricity against a commodification of blackness. “Imaginary blackness”, as Gilroy observes, is globally exported as Americocentric pop culture while, at the same time, the diverse histories of Africanist peoples are often neglected and obscured by centuries of Eurocentric racism (2004: 180).³⁷ More contemporary articulations of Afrocentricity also no longer so

37. For the latter point, see Gilroy, who as of 2000 argued that “hip-hop’s marginality is now as official and routinized as its overblown defiance, even if the music and its matching life-style are still being presented — and marketed — as outlaw forms” (2004: 180). I agree, though “hip-hop” is not one monolithic entity and part of this project’s design is to draw attention to the multiplicity of contents embedded within the globalising consumerisation and consumption of blackness — in particular, its futurological and alien variants that provide a different perspective than that of the “revolutionary *conservatism* that constitutes [hip-hop’s] routine political focus” (2004: 180). Of course, Gilroy’s definition of “conservative” is entirely unsympathetic to the Nation of Islam and like militant approaches. While I share in his critique, again, part of my project here is to reveal futurological dimensions that unearth such militancy, transforming the latter into a means for, as Sun Ra often evoked, “discipline”.

easily subscribe to reductive ethnonationalism, at least not by geographical bounding. Contemporary Afrocentricity is able to articulate positions that encompass diasporic and dispersed forms of belonging.

Juan-Pablo González, in a commentary for the contemporary Africanist culture and arts website, *This Is Africa*, draws attention to conditions of Afrodiasporic alienation that reveal what he sees as a “unique identity”. I turn to this commentary as it offers a provisional means of differentiating Afrocentrism from Afrofuturism, even as the two are entangled in their historical unfolding as well as conceptual and mythological resources. But González’s commentary also demonstrates the way in which diasporic belonging — usually understood as a cross-cultural flow of post-nationalist movements and migrations that destabilises ethnocentric identity — can be conservatively read as ontologically hermetic, producing a unique yet homogeneous Afrocentric subject:

As Africans, we belong to a Diaspora. No matter where in the world we are as an African, or whether we know or don’t know where in Africa our ancestors are from, we have this unique unity. Another interesting phenomenon of being African is how society interprets our presence in this world — through psychological extremes. Exoticised in some situations (and times), anathema in others, and subjected to treatment no one else has to experience. These are the conditions under which we have forged and continue to forge our identities. In the diaspora, under constant watch, pressure and oppression from the outside, we never fully assimilate into the majority culture due to the physicality of the colour-line — whereas, other cultures eventually fold into whiteness and Euro-centricity. Africans are expected to take on board the cultural qualities of others, to subjugate and erase our own culture, but required to continually exist as an outsider. It is this perpetual, unwilling reality we Africans navigate that is constantly manifested in our art as we continue to write ourselves against an omnipresent army of existence erasers (González 2013).

González offers a candid and revealing description of a “diasporic Afrocentricity”³⁸ that offers its own “psychological extreme”: one in which the conflicting experiences of exoticisation and exclusion unifies the diaspora — solidarity, as it were, in trenchant unassimilation against the “existence erasers” — thereby giving cause to celebrate a seeming contradiction: a diasporic Afrocentric exceptionalism.³⁹ Yet it is the value of such an experiential account — “subjected to treatment no one else has to experience” — that leads us to reflect upon its differences from the Afrofuturist concept of diaspora that is inferred through *Alien Nation*. In González, it is the *ethnonationalism of the alien as “African”* itself that unifies the raciology of the “Afro” into a geographically dispersed but colour-line codified “diaspora”. Here, one may critically read “diaspora” as synecdoche to an ultranationalist politics of the racialised body, bound together in suffering and skin. What is equally fascinating about González’s Afrocentrism is how it marshals the language of diaspora in the construction of a postnationalist black essentialism. For Gilroy, the diaspora disrupts nationalist configurations of belonging while “identities conceived diasporically resist reification in petrified forms” (2004: 252). Though the diaspora “allows for complex conceptions of sameness and for versions of solidarity”, writes Gilroy, it need *not* “repress differences within a dispersed group in order the maximize the differences between one ‘essential’

38. Though evidently articulating his own position, González backs up his opening claim with a salvo of citations from leaders of the “New Negro Renaissance” including W. E. B. Du Bois, William Pickens, Alain Locke, Eric Walrond, James Weldon Johnson, and Zora Neal Thurston, all drawn from Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Gene Andrew Jarrett’s edited volume, *The New Negro* (2007). González argues that these perspectives (which he interprets in favour of his argument), written primarily during the Harlem Renaissance (circa 1905–35), remain as valid arguments for an Afroraciology, though without offering a critical analysis as to why this should be the case.

39. A position that would certainly be challenged by indigenous peoples, feminisms, LGBT and queer activists, that would seek to expand the multiple coordinates of race, class, gender, age, disability, economic, and cultural discrimination against all manner of peoples. In this respect, González’s approach is broadly Afrocentrist, insofar as his position thinks the problem of racism as essentially situated amongst Afrodiasporic peoples insofar as it manifests “due to the physicality of the colour-line”. First, this position identifies the problem of “assimilation” strictly with colour, when other coordinates also prevail. Second, the colour line in-itself is not so clearly cut — where does one draw the line with peoples of mixed descent? Likewise, what of Chicano, Hispanic and Latin Americans, who at least in the United States, are rapidly becoming the largest group of peoples of “colour”? Are they de facto members of the Afrodiaspora through “colour” alone — in which case, cultural and nationalist differences are all but erased in deference to a politics of pigmentation — or are they able to “eventually fold into whiteness and Euro-centricity” while Afro-Americans are not, the latter by virtue of an eternally inescapable oppression?

community and others” (2004: 252). Here, González reverses Gilroy’s anti-essentialist configuration of diaspora by arguing that its very characteristics of dispersal — in which white oppression is everywhere — articulates the “unique unity” of the African. But this is not enough, of course: diasporic conditions must be traced to the assertion of a shared Africanist heritage that is ultimately situated within the raciological politics and ontology of skin. To this end, González maximises the greatest possible essential difference — that between us and them, the minority attempting to defend itself from the majority — by identifying an *eternal* threat from an assimilating and erasing “outside”.

González’s “postmodern” diasporic Afrocentricity must nonetheless protect the aging (which is to say modern) codex of race.⁴⁰ In fact it requires it. Without the threat of the racist outsider, there can be no unique unity manifested in the colour-line. The colour-line would cease to contain the means of solidarity were it not the line of discrimination and shared suffering. Regardless of the myriad differences that make-up the heterogeneous cultures and social spheres of the African continent, it is the concerted attack by outsiders that justifies González’s profound survivor narrative of cultural exceptionalism: that the African diaspora will be the *only* culture not to be erased and assimilated by Eurocentricity, precisely *because* of its pigmentation. “Culture” here, like “diaspora” does not mean what it appears to. It functions under the logic of raciology, here expressed with all the inflections of what Gilroy calls “racializing language”, a language that can “solicit the very feelings and solidarities that are usually assumed to precede them” (2004: 301). In short, racialised language attempts to construct an innate or naturalised raciology among an otherwise diasporic movement of belongings that are anything but centralised around the figure of “race”. Such racialised language, as Gilroy writes, calls into being, as

40. I use “codex” in its archaic sense, as a “code”, a book of statutes, but also a legal code. Its association to the Latin “a trunk of a tree” draws its meaning close to conceptual arborescence, to a metaphysical thinking of racialised origin through its “roots”.

“programs of action”

racializing regimes — structures of feeling and doing — that produce “races” in hierarchical arrangements by making “race” meaningful and keeping it as an obvious, natural, and seemingly spontaneous feature of ordered social life (Gilroy 2004: 301).

The unique identity is of course threatened. The threat from the outside is as nihilistic as it is martial. The barbarian at the gates is an “army of existence erasers”. It is an exceptional, bioraciological “unique unity” that must be saved from the monolithic threat of the majority culture whose force is so great that it operates at the level of a nihilist ontology. Forced assimilation and cultural erasure are the dangers awaiting those that cross the threshold to dwell within the “majority”. From these observations, I believe that it is clear that González’s Afrocentricity exhibits the various traits that Gilroy identifies as “revolutionary conservatism” — an “absolutist approach to both ethics and racial particularity” that calls for the militarisation of social and political interaction (2004: 206). Revolutionary conservatism embraces ultranationalisms, segregation, masculinity, authority, and racialising language to construct the unified homogeneity of racial particularity, both for “us” and for “them”. If the outsider is defined in terms of a nihilist army — an outsider to which there is no belonging, cosymbiosis, or past integration and shared hybridity — the call to arms to defend the colour-line is not far off. Gilroy identifies such revolutionary conservatisms as particularly embodied by the Nation of Islam, but also in the misogynist, patriarchal, consumerist and raciological lyrics, imagery, and presentation of mainstream hip-hop (2004: 178–80). Part of my project here, however, will be to complicate Gilroy’s encampments of cosmopolitanism to revolutionary conservatism to demonstrate how Afrofuturisms contaminates both.

There is a second contrast to Afrofuturist positions exhibited here, a closure of the temporal register

that is contra to the latter's chronopolitics: González's Afrocentricity delimits or shutters possible futurities — and especially *impossible* ones. For González, “we [Africans] *never* fully assimilate into the majority culture” (my italics). Besides the essentialist assumption of a raciology of “cultures” that denies the complex co-symbiosis, hybridity of origins and interdependence of belongings that characterise diasporic fluidity, the rhetoric of impossibility inscribed in the “never” suggests that the future presents only a stark dichotomy: assimilation (which is apparently bioraciologically impossible due to “the physicality of the color-line”, but also undesirable, as it signifies erasure by whiteness) or the forever oppressed and excluded Afrocentrist unity so as to defend against the erasure of existence (“to continually exist as an outsider”). Without a future, González's *chronopolitical* horizon inhabits a perpetual present that forces only one choice: Afrocentric and racialised existence or nihilistic erasure. The open-ended and imaginative temporal horizons of Afrofuturist chronopolitics — its MythSciences, in their alternative imaginings of future otherwise — deconstructs this black-or-white temporality and segregationist raciology of biocultural encampments by manifesting uncanny and unEarthly alternatives in the unfolding present that reveal the forced construct of such false binarisms.⁴¹

González's construction, however, is nothing new. It draws from a long history of assumptions that take for granted the static nature of the universe in general, the relations between humans in particular.⁴²

41. In this chapter I have not focused on providing content for such assertions, but here are a few examples. First, Janelle Monáe, whose androidal becoming, discussed in the second chapter, transforms representations of blackness. Second, two literary examples: Samuel R. Delany's *Triton: An Ambiguous Heterotopia* (1976), depicts the planet Triton where, in the “zone”, any consensual act conceivable (sexual or otherwise, bordering on the nonconsensual) is permissible. As in Delany's *Dhalgren* (1980), a polymorphous sexuality and its unfettered desire, conjoined with an anarchist topography, destabilise “race” (these worlds, however, are not utopias: hence their “ambiguity” — also see the footnote below). A third example, in the unfolding present, and as a participatory model, is the global network of rave culture, where the “vibe” and “transcendence” of the dancefloor — in which Afrofuturist electronic music is to be prominently found — proffers heterotopias of *jouissance* (again: not as utopia, but a shifting site, of futurisms enacted) (see St John 2009; van Veen 2003, 2010), but also the Temporary Autonomous Zone in general as a space of liberation, see (Lawrence 2003; Pini 2001).

42. In this respect, I am thinking here of science fiction author Ursula K. Le Guin's wonderful book, *The Dispossessed: An Ambiguous Utopia* [1974], that explores — among other things including the power relations and raciologies of different political systems, including capitalism, state communism, and anarcho-syndicalism — the work of an anarchist physicist (Shevek) whose general theory of time is based on perpetual change. For Shevek, the core laws of the universe are reflected in the metaphysical and political systems of anarcho-syndicalism, and it is from a society forever in flux that he is able to conceive of a physics of flux. Of note, Shevek's planet (Anarres) is “an

It is worth rewinding the timeline to the middle of the 20th century, in which Americocentric black nationalism was fuelled by the belief that Jim Crow laws of segregation would never be repealed. The Nation of Islam (NOI) under Elijah Muhammad strongly argued for “racial” segregation precisely because — and as Malcolm X powerfully orated throughout the 1950s until his break with the Nation in 1964 — the NOI believed, and *needed their members to believe*, that white elites would *never* let desegregation take place.⁴³ Calling integration “an American nightmare” benefiting only the “middle-class so-called Negroes”, in 1962 Malcolm X argued that “we [the NOI] don’t believe it is possible for the American white man in sincerity to take the action necessary to correct the unjust conditions that 20 million black people are made to suffer, morning, noon and night” (in Marable 2011: 203). While the complexity of X’s statement still resonates today — the 21st century is still very much an era of racialised inequality — the persistent disbelief in overcoming segregation led to unlikely bedfellows, from a “private caucus” with the Klu Klux Klan in January 1961 to public affiliation with the American Nazi party (whose leader, George Lincoln Rockwell, spoke at a NOI rally in 1962) (see Marable 2011: 201). “Since white supremacy would always be a reality,” writes Manning Marable of the Nation of Islam’s ideology of black nationalism, apparently “blacks were better off reaching a working relationship with racist whites rather than allying themselves with Northern liberals” (2011: 137). The Nation’s

ambiguous heterotopia” because its (incredibly well crafted) system is imperfect, troubled by centralisations of power and bureaucracies that are not supposed to exist, beset by propaganda, ideology, and ignorance concerning the “propertarian” planet of Unarres from which the radicals fled over a centuries past, and belaboured by the numerous pitfalls of collective living. That said, its fluidic social relations and open structures of syndicalism are designed to facilitate “permanent revolution”, a phrase that could also describe the “open ended temporality” of Afrofuturist conceptual positions when applied to political formations (see footnote above). The Afrofuturist aspects of *The Dispossessed* occur at the level of time itself.

43. Despite the termination of Jim Crow in the United States, ever more insidious forms of economic, class, and gender discrimination remain, often through unequal distribution of public services as well as exploitive practices of neoliberal capitalism that target low-income (racialised) peoples. See, for example, Manning Marable’s *How Capitalism Underdeveloped Black America* (1983). As Charles Bukowski was fond of saying, “Slavery was never abolished, it was only extended to include all the colors” (though this ignores the white European and indigeneous slavery practiced by the Spanish in Saint-Domingue *before* establishing West Africans as the sole source of forced labour). As I write this, Canadian prisons have seen a 75% increase in “visible minorities” over the last decade, with an increase from 12, 000 to 15, 000 inmates despite an overall drop in crime (Brosnahan 2013).

alliance with fascist counterparts served a further purpose: that of ensuring the hermetic focus of the Nation itself on the divine messenger, Elijah Muhammad, who *alone* “could maintain his personal authority only by forcing his followers away from the outside world” (Marable 2011: 129). Elijah Muhammed, here, is the “unique unity” embodied in the divine body.⁴⁴ Gilroy too articulates the consequences of the raciology of radical conservatism in establishing

transgressive contact with the forbidden Other in a strange but entirely predictable act of fraternalist mirroring. The segregationists and purifiers who are located on both sides of the fatal boundary between “races” claim monopoly of the useful capacity to handle those contacts that would be damaging to everyone else. The enemy who announces himself to be your enemy ceases to be an enemy. He becomes an ally, and a more authentic and treacherous foe is produced in the form of the enemy who tells you he can be your ally in the coalitional struggles that can bring about justice and rights for all. The Nazi and the Klansman are preferable because they are open and honest about their racialised beliefs. You know where you are with the Klansman (2004: 236).

To these Afrocentric attempts to sever contact with the other, we must again turn to Afrofuturism, where the meaning of the “Afro”, of all that blackness and the African signifies, is posited with a difference: that difference being its futurity, a futurity that opens it towards an ever-unfolding openness, a process that does not shy away from its alienation, but rather than ultra-nationalise the alien into an ethnobiocultural camp, seeks to transform the conceptual and historical givens of its condition by

44. While I do not have space to develop this here, Muhammed’s role as the NOI’s divine sovereign ought to be contrasted to Sun Ra’s role as the divine Pharaoh. Though NOI doctrine specifies that the “original black man is god”, Muhammed had to suppress this reading; thus the development, by Clarence 13X (who renamed himself “Allah”) of the Five Percent, as a *decentralised* offshoot of the NOI. In the Five Percent, *all black males* (and arguably females) claim absolute divine sovereignty. Thus the very concept of the sovereign as a singularity is given over to egalitarian (though racialised) multiplicity. Even its racialisation, however, is called into question with founding white members under Allah (see Knight 2013). Such sovereign multiplicities, I would suggest, were presaged by Ra and the Arkestra, suggesting an Afrofuturist but also anarcho-syndicalist emphasis on the divine spark of the individual (as for Ra, one is divine only if living in collective harmony with the universe: music is the plane of (such) wisdom).

disrupting the underlying logics of raciology and Enlightenment human exceptionalism. Afrofuturism signals, in its own name, a transformative potential for the “Afro” and all that it might *become*. Rather than remain subjected to what González describes as a “perpetual, unwilling reality”, Afrofuturism — which I here deploy in its conceptual force — seeks to remake reality (and indeed, project multiple “realities”). However, what Afrofuturism and González’s Afrocentrist position both converge upon is the median of whiteness: that whiteness (and masculinist whiteness at that) is the de facto embodied existence for post-colonised, settler territories and their sociopolitical hierarchies. The common overlap is the very real effects of Armageddon been-in-effect where masculinist whiteness remains the de facto embodiment of the “human” as-such — perhaps not maintained in all aspects of the cultural register (as noted, blackness is a global cultural export), but everywhere visible by observing the gender, class, and “race” of who occupies governmental, and perhaps more significantly, *economic* seats of power.

If González’s account of unassimilation speaks of the formation of Afrocentric identity through exclusion — Nation through alienation — then we need to turn to *dehumanisation*, as the Armageddon-effect of slavery transformed to a posthumanist register, to unfold the meaning of the Afrofuturist *Alien* Nation. I would also like to briefly suggest that it is the question of the human — or what becomes of the Enlightenment category of the human — that situates differences in sociopolitical formation, notably that between the Civil Rights movement, on the one channel, and Afrocentrist or black nationalist movements such as the Nation of Islam and the Black Panthers, on the other. Afrofuturism, I will suggest, inhabits and warps both paths while it undertakes a third strategy, that of an exodus, from their respective encampments.

Afrofuturism opens the following questions: what does one do with the Enlightenment category of

the human, the very category that underpins the “obvious dehumanisation” that justified, in philosophico-ideological registers, which is to say the courts of public opinion and politics, the economic exploitation of forced labour known as slavery? How does one address dehumanisation — or the dehuman in-itself? A new differentiation arises, one that does not find itself polarised between the figures of Malcolm X and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., but traced between Afrofuturism’s exodus from the Enlightenment category of the human, on the one channel, and movements that implicitly or explicitly accept the definitions provided by the Western Enlightenment project of the racialised human as the base category of lived existence, on the other.

Dehumanisation (II)

White America pretends to ask herself, “What do these Negroes want?” White America knows that four hundred years of cruel bondage has made these twenty-two million ex-slaves too (mentally) blind to see what they really want.

— Malcolm X, 1st December 1963⁴⁵

Dehumanisation remains a complex term. It names, according to Gayatri Spivak, a signifier where its terminology “gives way”. There are “extreme examples of marginalization where the term itself gives way”, writes Spivak: “de-humanization, transportation, genocide” (1999: 395). Spivak writes sparingly of dehumanisation, putting it to use only when discussing slavery. The American “Founder’s Constitution” implicitly enshrined dehumanisation: “African peoples were inscribed as property in order to get around

45. Ten days after the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, speaking at Manhattan Center, New York, the same speech after which, during the question and answer session, Malcolm X made the infamous “chickens come home to roost” quip that led to his 90-day “silencing” by (and subsequent split with) the Nation of Islam (in Marable 2011: 271).

the problem of the representation of slaves as wealth”, writes Spivak (1999: 395). This was not, of course, the only reason: raciology exceeds economic rationalisation — signifying the trembling loss of “rational” meaning, where the term “gives way” to the unspeakable, in the witnessing of brute arrangements of power — just as it provides its very reasoning, wherein the subhuman is but property, chattel capital:

The key slogan in the struggle against the British had been “no taxation without representation”. . . . The acceptance that slaves as wealth should entitle Southern voters to extra representation built an acknowledgement of slavery into the heart of the Constitution (Blackburn 2011: 123–24).

First hypothesis: in reference to enslaved peoples, dehumanisation emphasises an absolute violence wrought by the pernicious institution upon the absoluty of the subject precisely because it negates the “subject” as existent. The negation of the “subject” produces victimology, but also the circumscribing of the desubjectified body as object. The effects of dehumanisation, as victimology, as suffering, as de-existence, are inscribed in the narratives of former slaves, where the term articulates in one palpable word the destructive force wrought by slavery upon the subject’s sense of a coherent, individuated selfhood.⁴⁶ “Dehumanisation” quivers with a giving-way of meaning. It presupposes that bodies were once “human” subjects, but no longer — even as racism would dictate that inferior races are not born human, but unhuman. Therein lies the doubled-meaning of dehumanisation, for the sign, in the temporal unfolding of its processural giving-way of meaning, implies that all are born human as human, and that violence wrought upon the subject strips away born humanity. The risk with deploying the term is that it reifies itself: that it makes us think that slaves, once “dehumanised”, are indeed unhuman, and deserving of their servitude. The other more insidious risk — even as it remains its affirmative echo, which is precisely why it remains insidious — is that dehumanisation is viewed as never fully successful,

46. I will turn to the slave narrative of Harriet Jacobs in the next chapter (Jacobs 2001).

so that once the dehumanised are revealed as human-after-all, rationally explicated as autonomous subjects “just like the rest of us”, they can be interpellated by the system that hitherto dehumanised them, and profitably reinserted back into it — though, of course, as speechless subaltern subjects, used goods, partial objects, and other such uni-formed positions.

Thus the term must be carefully tended so that it is positioned as a signifier signifying the violence of the slave owning class, reflective of the economic systems, political rhetorics and juridical precedents that established Atlantic slavery as an institution under law — and not a descriptor of the slave in the latter’s inherent subjectivity or ontology. The same goes for “slave”, which denotes a structural position of violent disenfranchisement in its enforced servitude — one that can be articulated through race, class, and gender as coordinates of the enslaved class, the latter entrapped within overwhelming economic, political, and cultural systems of raw power — and not an ontological category or species.

In this section I want to further explicate the mechanics of dehumanisation, teasing out its affirmative echo, where it suggests something other than its negativity. That dehumanisation can “give way” suggests its potential to signify as an exodus towards a becoming otherwise. In particular, “dehumanisation”, as a processural term, suggest that the “ex-human” is never wholly subservient, never fully objectified, nor completely reduced to its supposed unhuman status. Herein is the pivot of the humanist ideal that offers a rallying point for revolt (in that there always remains a spark of insurrection even in the most hapless enslaved)⁴⁷ just as it supports the worthy aims of abolitionism: that the “human” side of the slave can be saved. Yet does not this approach — that there is a kernel of humanity that requires salvation, its universalism expressed as “human rights” — overemphasise the rule of the

47. Thus W.E.B. Du Bois writes of the “slaves in the South” who were stirred by the Haitian revolt. He notes three “fierce attempts at insurrection, — in 1800 under Gabriel in Virginia, in 1822 under Vesey in California, and in 1831 again in Virginia under the terrible Nat Turner” (1994: 28–29).

human? The question I reiterate has had currency for some time. Writing in *The Souls of Black Folk* [1901], W. E. B. Du Bois raised the more complex problem of enduring servitude that persists by means other than those of outright dehumanisation (1994). Subjects of various positions remain subservient to multiple interests without necessarily being “dehumanised”. The problem appears as a classical cipher of ideology: that those who think they are free nonetheless are not so, but rather beholden to implicit and ingrained interests that make them act against their freedom. As Du Bois often so beautifully explicated, the problems of unfreedom and subservience dogged the Reconstruction era. Du Bois’ critique of the 1895 Atlanta compromise of Booker T. Washington, for example — Washington called for trades education and economic advancement while avoiding confrontation over segregation and citizenship — provides a useful model as to how “dehumanisation” became normalised as an invisible set of racialised practices. Though the institution of slavery had been officially abolished, the category of the “Negro” persisted as a kind of supplement; neither accorded the rights and privileges of being fully human, nor shackled as a slave, the “Negro” internalised the problematic of dehumanisation, producing a quasi-subjectivity existing in the in-between. Washington attempted to set aside (unsuccessfully) the problem of dehumanisation, even as the sociopolitical conditions of structural racism perpetuated it. The long years before the Civil Rights Act of 1964 led to critics such as Du Bois (and in other anticolonial contexts, Frantz Fanon) attempting to theorise and grasp the destabilising and enraging effects of in-between existence. Du Bois sought a psychological, but also ontological and sociopolitical assessment of “the Negro” in the figure of “double consciousness”, that split between “an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder” (1994: 2).

Even after the institution of Civil Rights, Public Enemy would suggest that the problematic of an internalised, but also socioeconomic structure of dehumanisation persisted into 1989: such is the Armageddon been-in-effect of ghettoised impoverishment, with the iconic “ghettos” of Watts, the Bronx, Queens, Long Island, and South Central Los Angeles serving as the bastions of structural unemployment that fed into a revolving-door system of criminalisation and imprisonment. And today, arguments that resonate with those of Booker T. Washington remain virulent, encoded within neoliberalisms that advocate the entrepreneurial individual and the free market as granting all the bootstraps needed for lifting oneself from poverty. Du Bois called such myopic ideologies “the speech and thought of triumphant commercialism”, these “ideals of material prosperity” (1994: 26) that thought the accumulation of wealth could resolve embedded racism and the internalisation of dehumanisation. In 1901, no less relevant then as now, Du Bois argued that “economic advance” was impossible without suffrage, political representation, civil rights, and higher education; indeed, it was Washington’s “narrow” focus on economic and industrial “advance” that maintained unfreedom despite the renunciation of institutionalised slavery (Du Bois 1994: 28–32):

For this much all men know: despite compromise, war, and struggle, the Negro is not free. In the backwoods of the Gulf States, for miles and miles, he may not leave the plantation of his birth; in well-nigh the whole rural South the black farmers are peons, bound by law and custom to economic slavery, from which the only escape is death or the penitentiary (Du Bois 1994: 24).

The idealisation of the human also ignores the more insidious operation of dehumanisation at the level of raciology: that, strictly speaking, dehumanisation never happens to humans. Those enslaved are not human, they are but “Negroes”; they deserve their fate. Du Bois, writing a century before Gilroy, suggests that the language and affects of applied raciology (qua racism) engender its effects: “relentless

color-prejudice is more often a cause than a result of the Negro's degradation" (1994: 32).

The Forgotten Exodus and Invisible Insurrections of Slavery

Second hypothesis: dehumanisation, as the effect of structural racism in the institution of slavery, requires that humans are not dehumanised, but that *unhumans* are "always already" dehumanised. The retroactive positing of an originless effect held within the phrase "always already" suggests a further set of assumptions, or rather a coda of ethnobiocultural essentialisms that are inscribed on the skin and physique of the black body. The black body is caught between virility, sexuality, and prowess, on the one channel, and passivity and docility on the other. Tropes of masculinity and femininity are inscribed across this axis: the feminine, docile slave; the masculine, active sports hero.⁴⁸ The contradictory positioning of the racialised body, at once both active and passive, a threat and an attraction, has become today a symbolic figure of the Westernised, yet exotic other in the branding and exporting of sanitised "urban" youth cultures. Paul Gilroy writes that

Corporate multiculturalism is giving the black body a makeover. We are witnessing a series of struggles over the meaning of that body, which intermittently emerges as a signifier of prestige, autonomy, transgression, and power in a supranational economy of signs that is not reducible to the old-style logics of white supremacism (2004: 270).

48. Gilroy details the use of black bodies in sport to embody various politico-nationalist agendas, the first and most prominent example of which is the Joe Louis v. Mac Schmeling bout of June 1938, seen as the symbolic (but also embodied) triumph of democracy over fascist racial doctrine (2004: 165–70). Louis' memoirs, however, rightly "challenge America's moral claims by quietly drawing attention to both nations' reliance on a politics of race" (Gilroy 2004: 169). The meaning of the bout in American reportage was contested, reflecting the contradictions inherent to the question of "race", and to the meaning of a "Negro" representing democracy in a de facto white supremacist state; the New York Times dismissed the fight as "meaningless and that 'nothing had happened'" while "Negro" media celebrated the outcome (in Gilroy 2004: 169). Malcolm X notes the Louis bouts in his autobiography (X 1999: 73–74), a scene that is fictionalised in the 1992 Spike Lee joint, *Malcolm X*, as taking place during a shift of Malik Shabazz working the "Yankee Clipper" New Haven train line.

But what are these “old-style logics” of white supremacy? To admit that the body forced to labour was *once* human would fracture the fragility of raciology in which “races” are “naturally” unhuman, and (as the “logic” goes) fit for use as slaves. Raciology, however, is not only internalised by the dehumanised, but by those who enjoy the privilege of human supremacy as cast by its white mythology. As Eugene D. Genovese observes in his detailed accounts of the power dynamics and operations of Antebellum slave plantations, a shattering of racist beliefs took place during the “moment of truth” when “slaves” fled their former masters during and after the Civil War (see Genovese 1976).

What are the resources for refusing the psychic imprisonment of dehumanisation and the technologies of subordination that constructed the real artifice of being known as the “slave”? In this section, I wish to focus upon the reserve of *exodus* — of sudden withdrawal — as exhibited by enslaved populations. The accounts of exodus, flight, and withdrawal I will turn to in this section reinforce how “dehumanisation” is a process open to its refusal and subversion,⁴⁹ and that slaves who *appeared* to be “dehumanised” — docile and loving slaves to the master — were masking the energies of revolt.⁵⁰

For slaves did revolt, and with greater effect and force than often suggested, and against *both sides* during the Civil War (see Hahn 2009). Simon Schama argues that the Revolutionary War of 1776 has a “dirty little secret”: the mass flight of slaves to British lines, where they were promised their liberty should they choose to fight; such a historical perspective, writes Schama, “forces an honest and overdue rethinking of the war as involving, at its core, a third party” (2008: 9). Hahn’s slim volume, however,

49. Or that the tools leading up to the 19th century were not yet effective enough to reduce populations to degree zero servility. What a thesis such as this might have to address in twenty or one hundred years time with advances in biogenetics is frightening to comprehend. Science fiction is again our guide, in its anticipation of dystopian futures (in particular, Ridley Scott’s *Blade Runner* [1982], but also Philip K. Dick’s *A Scanner Darkly* [1977]).

50. This last point is emphasised in the work of Homi K. Bhabha, reading Frantz Fanon, on the anticolonial practices of mimicry (Bhabha 1986, 1994). The figure of the double, of double consciousness, the veil, and black faces/white masks, will concern us in the next chapter.

makes the case for insurrection — indeed, posing the question as to whether historians have missed “the Greatest Slave Rebellion in Modern History” — among Southern slaves during the American Civil War. In the standard narrative of the conflict, the Union North took up arms against the slave-owning Confederacy South, if not at first over slavery, then at least by the end of the war claiming emancipation as its moral justification. Hahn points out, however, that this convenient narrative presupposes the passivity and/or neutrality of the slave class (2009: 58, 160–1). Confederate mythology and white supremacy, exemplified in films such as D.W. Griffith’s *Birth of a Nation* [1915], depict a rose-tinted relationship between benevolent white masters and vacuous, child-like slaves, both who, in Griffith’s masterpiece of Klu Klux Klan propaganda, view the Civil War as an invasion. Even among centrist, Abolitionist or integrationist accounts of the War, slaves were often praised for *not* rising up against the South. In their passivity, the Southern slaves demonstrated civility in this “white man’s war” — a war which was nothing less than a struggle over the fate of the black.

Hahn poses an alternative reading to the simplism in which passivity is equivocal to black patriotism. By contrast, suggest Hahn, Southern slaves were knowledgeable enough of the tricky political terrain in which the War was fought — in short, cognisant of the ideological role of emancipation, and suspicious enough of the North’s apparent “freedom” — to carefully navigate between full-scale rebellion and widespread insurrection:

Together, the evidence suggests that slaves could be acutely aware of conflicts that erupted between white people and nations ruled by white people; that slaves often imagined a set of possible allies and enemies; that slaves could be cognizant of the national and international struggle over slavery and the slave trade and, depending on where they resided, of momentous emancipations; that slaves often became conversant with institutions and issues of local and

national politics and might develop sophisticated understandings of how the American political system operated; and that slaves fashioned interpretations of what seemed to be afoot, at times in ways that moved well beyond the intentions of the political actors (Hahn 2009: 75).

The difference I wish to emphasise here is between a racialised passivity, and passivity as strategic withdrawal, impassive resilience, and camouflage. The latter suggests the deployment of passivity as a strategy that masks clandestine activity, including direct action. Hahn outlines several communicative conditions for such a thesis. For such strategic passivity to be effective, there must have been operative systems of communication among southern slave plantations capable of transmitting accurate and timely information concerning lines of flight, the political stakes of the war, and the conditions of the war itself (2009: 48); and that communications must have included a nuanced and critical view of the Unionist North (2009: 80, 84).

Hahn sets to work on these two conditions, recounting evidence of word-of-mouth networks⁵¹ that demonstrate that not only were slave plantations aware of slave rebellions in other countries — such as the French colony of Saint-Domingue — but that these networks were thick connections capable of transmitting valuable information of escape and aid (2009: 37–43).⁵² It is from this position that Hahn makes the case for widespread insurrection during the Civil War, including acts of sabotage, disruption, property destruction, refusal of work, demands for pay, direct action and exodus (2009: 60–6, 70–2, 141). Though southern slaves did not stage a full-scale rebellion against the slave-owning South, they fled wherever possible to Northern lines — and to in-between spaces, seeking gaps between map and

51. And networks of talking-drums, until drums were abolished: “...it is absolutely necessary to the safety of this Province, that all due care be taken to restrain Negroes from using or keeping of drums, which may call together or give sign or notice to one another of their wicked designs and purposes” (Slave Code of South Carolina, Article 36, 1740). For an excellent popular (but scholarly-informed) account of the transformation of African diasporic rhythms through slave networks, see (Zhao 2013).

52. In the following observations, Hahn draws upon prior historical research. Hahn’s gesture is to focus on the way in which insurrection was downplayed during the Reconstruction, and to stimulate further research in this area.

territory, North and South. Implicit in Hahn's thesis is that exodus is a form of insurrection (2009: 141). To flee in an organised fashion — exodus as strategic retreat — is to establish the conditions for a new republic. Hahn traces the attempts by Africanist-Americans, former slaves or not, to establish autonomous territory or freetowns, after the model of the Maroon societies of Saint-Domingue, in geographies where neither North nor South would venture (2009: 24, 32). The microhistory of Maroonage implies that organised exodus was undertaken as a separation from the white State itself. Freetowns often had their own armed militias, systems of governance and basic infrastructure, networks of trade and barter, and industries including agriculture and amenities. Can Maroonage be viewed as total secession from whitewashed systems of sociopolitical governance? Perhaps the most telling evidence for a radical break is that, like the French Revolution, time itself was overthrown, the marking of the past and the future redefined, the rituals of life and religion rewritten:

black settlements and enclaves developed around churches benevolent societies of their own making and around political calendars of their own design, which, among other things, commemorated signal events of an unfolding emancipation process: the abolition of the international slave trade, the ending of slavery in their particular states, and the abolition of slavery in the British West Indies (Hahn 2009: 33).

But what happened to the taste for self-governance that Hahn says “emerged out of the struggles and experiences of enslavement and quickly manifested itself in the period after emancipation” (2009: 139)? It is here that strategic withdrawal and insurrection became reterritorialised as dignified passivity during the era of Reconstruction, both by that era's black leadership as well as later historians who took for granted statements that obfuscated the insurrectionist irruptions of exodus. A strategic erasure of the many instances of rebellion and insurrectionist exodus prevailed:

But with rare exception, [African-Americans] did not speak or write of rebellion and revolution. From the hustings, the pulpits, the newspapers, and the history books, black leaders took pains to stress the order, discipline, responsibility, restraint, and sobriety that were to be found in their wartime communities, and especially among their men. Slaves did not so much rebel against their condition and their masters as come to save the Union in its darkest hour. . . . They were civil, their masters barbarous (Hahn 2009: 104).

Genovese also suggests that even while conceding to their situation and displaying outwards signs of affection for their masters — “in order to curb [the master’s] tendencies toward cruelty and even greater injustice” (Genovese 1976: 91) — the enslaved undertook significant acts of refusal. The outward appearance of slave complicity has led to the characterisation of American slaves as less rebellious than those of the Caribbean.⁵³ As Genovese points out, such a claim ignores the differences in governance and economic structure between the colonised Caribbean (in which a minority of colonisers oversaw many times the number of slaves) and the distributed, autonomous, plantation-based system of the United States in which slavery was conducted by privateers, families, and dispersed corporate encampments. Yet what Hahn’s research suggests is that the American territory was not as cohesive as it appeared. The vast expanses of the United States revealed a network of microcolonisations, with each plantation its own close-quartered “island”. Insurrection and exodus, where they occurred, produced uprisings and escapes less detectable than the more evident overthrow of island-based regimes, precisely because of the size of the territory, and the gaps *within* it.

Unlike the Caribbean, in which for the most part slave-owners lived in armed encampments — a situation that led to the successful slave revolt of Saint-Domingue in August 1791⁵⁴ — the close-

53. This characterization may itself be passing, but it is noted by both Genovese and Hahn.

quarters of antebellum slavery, particularly in its familial habitudes, demanded a contradictory ideology to justify slavery and the privilege of the plantation slave-owners. Genovese argues that plantation owners justified, and moralised slavery as an act of benevolent paternalism, in which slave owners “could deny to themselves that in fact they did cause suffering and could assert that their domination liberated the slaves from a more deprived existence” (1976: 91). The doctrine of paternalism meant that any act of resistance was interpreted as betrayal and treason, and thus dealt with harshly by violence, as the refusal was interpreted as a personal affront to the “family”. Yet, precisely because of the ideology of familial loyalty, slaves fought for “reciprocal rights”. If slaves were conceptualised by owners as part of a “loyal” but subservient “family”, then they afforded certain rights, not the least that of individuated autonomy:

To the tendency to make them creatures of another’s will [slaves] counterposed a tendency to assert themselves as autonomous human beings. And they thereby contributed, as they had to, to the generation of conflict and great violence (Genovese 1976: 91).

Genovese’s research into the doctrine of paternalism provides insight into the ways in which rebellion took place within the slave population — ways that again complicate the raciology of dehumanisation in the American context, and suggest that the content of internalisation expressed by paternalist ideology was not what the slave-owners intended. With the disruption of slavery by the Civil War, slaves began to flee. As Genovese writes, “The masters had expected more than obedience from their slaves; they had expected faithfulness — obedience internalized as duty, respect, and love” (1976: 97). All appearances had suggested that slaves had, for generations, dutifully internalised this disciplinary ideology, had in effect been properly dehumanised through a paternalism that pacified

54. This despite the “mulatto” sons and daughters of French whites and slaves being granted education and military training — the latter which was to work against them as “mixed-race” descendants organised the rebellion with freedmen (these two classes becoming the Haitian elite, leading to the two-class system still prevalent today) (see James 1989; James 2009: 51–71).

slaves through familialisation. Thus the defection of slaves “traumatised” their slave owners, who were not so much forced with comprehending “the sudden confrontation with the true attitudes of their slaves” but with “the enforced confrontation with themselves” (Genovese 1976: 98). According to Genovese, who cites multiple letters from plantation owners to this effect, such slave owners had wholly invested in their ideological role as paternalistic benefactors and thus could not comprehend the betrayal, in particular “the defection of their most trusted and pampered slaves”, the drivers and house servants (1976: 98). What the defection of slaves suggests is a twofold undermining of the paternalist ideology: that first and foremost, slavery did not eradicate the sense of autonomy of the subject. Crucially, something other or else resisted subordination. Second, enslaved subjects were not only capable of seeing themselves as other-than-slaves, but in most instances willing to exploit the first possible instance of exodus — and with or without hesitation, willing to abandon their so-called masters.

The Afrofuturist Exodus from the Human

The strategic act of exodus provides one set of coordinates for the emergent counter-tradition of Afrofuturism. In the above description, I have suggested, after Genovese, that forms of the subject, of inherent agency, persist despite the “always already” raciology of unhuman dehumanisation. That the master/slave relationship was recast by the enslaved and interpreted as an *intersubjective* relationship is explored in the colonial context by Fanon (2004). But an-other possibility also emerges among these conditions, an impossible yet futurist trajectory: an exodus not just from slavery and white systems of sociopolitical governance in the founding of a new republic, making use of gaps between the map and

the territory — an exodus that is romanticised in the black nationalist calls for segregation and actualised exodus in the 20th century — but an abandonment of the very Enlightenment subjectivity that institutes and polices the supremacy of the “human”.

The figures of alien becoming that abandon the human, I suggest, are on a continuum with historical deployments of radical passivity and exodus. I have drawn this speculative connection to emphasise the resources that the Afrofuturist exodus from the human draws upon: acts of exodus from master ideologies coupled with, at the same time, a profound distrust of humanist proclamations, emancipations, and promises.

In Afrofuturism, the coordinates of exodus are amplified through a science fictional imaginary. Exodus operates not just as an escape from the geographical confines of slavery, but from the planet as a whole. The genesis of Afrofuturism commences through acts of exodus: from so-called reality, from the timeline, from the planet, from the human subject. The most radical Afrofuturist tendency abandons modes of the human subject, if not from the human subject *in universitate*, in which the “human” as-such is displaced as a category of belonging. In Eshun’s words, from the perspective of an Afrofuturist exodus, “the human is a pointless and treacherous category” (Eshun 1999: 00[-005]).

Eshun’s act of treachery towards the human is positioned at the limit of its Afrofuturist abandonment, in which the human is given up for good, so to speak: the ontological, which is to say the culturally-encoded and politically-fraught category of the human reveals itself to be all-but depleted, its resources exhausted by centuries of slavery and its larger historical juggernauts of colonialism and imperialism. The “human” is a fraught and loaded term, not to be trusted; thus one encounters Eshun’s emphasis on the “extreme indifference to the human” (1999: 00[-005]) as a postulate of Afrofuturist

belonging. It is strategically crafted as a response to the enduring internalisation of dehumanisation wrought by slavery. In an interview from 1996 — one that I have and will excerpt from again to emphasise its points — Eshun underscores the alien–abduction–slavery trajectory to his post-humanist thinking:

And there's the key thing that drew me into all this [i.e., Sonic Afrofuturism]: the idea of alien abduction, the idea of slavery as an alien abduction which means that we've all been living in an alien-nation since the 18th century. And I definitely agree with that, I definitely use that a lot. The mutation of African male and female slaves in the 18th century into what became negro, and into the entire series of humans that were designed in America. That whole process, the key thing behind it all is that in America none of these humans were *designated* human. It's in music that you get this sense that most African-Americans owe *nothing* to the status of the human. African-Americans still had to protest, still had to *riot*, to be judged Enlightenment humans in the 1960s — it's quite incredible. . . . there's this sense of the human as being a really pointless and treacherous category, a category which has *never meant anything* to African-Americans (Eshun 1999: A[192-3]).

Like Eshun, I have positioned the discourse of alien abduction and Armageddon been-in-effect to the American context, though its effects, as Eshun's comments suggest, are germane to the affects and movements that make up the transnational belongings of the Afrodiaspora. Eshun's insight into the expansiveness of Afrofuturist explorations of an unhuman becoming, and the way the latter interprets its historical conditions *as* Alien Nation, demands that the uncanny resonance of Afrofuturist “un-humanism” and its “alien abduction” resonate beyond the epidermal confines of racialisation. Afrofuturism's insights into post-humanism, through slavery, colonialism, and other forms of raciological violence, are universalist: they inject a much-needed philosopheme — uncertain, messy, and

paradoxical with alien becomings, ungrounded intensities, emergent collectivities and science fictional aesthetic practices — to the planetary conditions of species existence, precisely because they seek an offworlding or unearthly perspective.

In the Afrofuturist rejection of the “human”, we encounter a paradoxical response to dehumanisation: the affirmative embrace of dehumanisation as a chance to remake the process of individuation anew.

This alien position arises in uncanny places.

For example, in the heart of Negritude. As its future: the “impulsiveness” and “unforeseeable” futurity foretold by Fanon (2008: 113).

Returning to Fanon’s impassioned chapter in *Black Skin, White Masks*, “The Lived Experience of the Black Man”, Fanon quotes Aimé Césaire, from *Notebook of a Return to My Native Land*, in his revelry over Negritude:

But those without whom the earth would not be the earth

Gibbosity all the more beneficial as the earth more and

more

Abandons the earth

Silo where is stored and ripens what is earthiest about the

earth

My negritude is not a stone, its deafness hurled against

the clamor of day

My negritude is not an opaque spot of dead water over

the dead eye of the earth

My negritude is neither a tower nor a cathedral

It reaches deep down into the red flesh of the soil

It reaches deep into the blazing flesh of the sky

It pierces opaque prostration with its straight patience

— Césaire, (in Fanon 2008: 103)

There is an-other possibility in this poem, a third position between Afrocentricity, on the one channel, and the explosion of rage brought about by its negation, on the other: the abandonment of Earth.

But this abandonment of Earth by Césaire takes place through Earth. Earth more and more abandons Earth. It becomes unEarthly.

Negritude, attached to Earth, must abandon it. An Earth that is not only of the red flesh of the soil, embodied and epidermalised, but of the blazing flesh of the sky, where it reaches deep:

Into space.

Where it pierces the opaque, as it becomes unEarthly in its abandonment.⁵⁵

55. I am here anticipating the poetics, ontological and political, of unEarthly abandonment in the concept of the “uncanny” (*unheimlich*), that I address in chapter six, “Calling Planet Earth”.

The first lines of a Sun Ra “poem”:

Abandon them!

Abandon them!

According to their abandonment-----

According to their words and deed-----

The things they say and do.

They are not real.

— Sun Ra, “The World Clock” (2005b: 438)

Where the unreal masquerades as the real: where real consciousness appears in its unreality — there it is abandoned.

Ø

Chapter 05

God-breathing Machines:

The White Mythologies of Consciousness

Concern for humanization leads at once to the recognition of dehumanization, not only as an ontological possibility but as an historical reality. . . Within history, in concrete, objective contexts, both humanization and dehumanization are possibilities for man as an uncompleted being conscious of his incompleteness.

— Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970: 27)

For my master, whose restless, craving, vicious nature roved about day and night, seeking whom to devour, had just left me, with stinging, scorching words; words that scathed ear and brain like fire. O, how I despised him! I thought how glad I should be, if some day when he walked the earth, it would open and swallow him up, and disencumber the world of a plague.

When he told me that I was made for his use, made to obey his command in *every* thing; that I was nothing but a slave, whose will must and should surrender to his, never before had my puny arm felt half so strong.

— Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* [1861] (2001: 18)

“I *was* nothing but a slave”: Harriet Jacobs’ tale of escape from slavery wields the past tense like a weapon. She *was* a slave, but no longer. What was once the recognition of an enslaved self is now something other or else: what Fanon called the “unforeseeability” of “black consciousness” (2008: 113).

Yet is there a *black* consciousness? Is raciology constitutive of the human, or distinct from it? Is there a raciology of consciousness?

• • •

In thinking through Afrofuturist works and the living myths of its various personae, I have adopted a discourse of *becoming* and the *alien* drawn from works that identify these concepts as signifiers of transformation. In the previous chapter, I speculated upon the “conditions” of Alien Nation and Armageddon-been-in-effect, tracing the transformative lineage of “dehumanisation” as a condition of Afrofuturist abandonment, a condition that is also the effect of a chronopolitical re-reading of historical trajectories. As I sought to demonstrate, revisionist re-readings are encamped into contentious polarisations, divided by the concept of an Afrocentricity, where polemicalised texts attempt to adjudicate the authentic boundaries of historicity. In this chapter, I wish to undertake a similar chronopolitics, by way of tracing, and thus re-reading, a speculative condition/effect of Afrofuturist exodus from the “human”, by questioning the metaphysics of “consciousness” and its “transformations”. I deploy the term “consciousness” in its contextualisation, and constellation, by various texts. At various points, “consciousness” is a simile to “self-consciousness”, reflecting the production of a consciousness-of-self, whereas at other points, “consciousness” indicates the investigation and critique of a metaphysical concept and its raciological coordinates. In neither case is a singular meaning of “consciousness” being sought, as if in a universalised phenomenology. This investigation into the question of raciology and consciousness takes place in the tension between texts that underpin the philosophical centres of Empire and those that destabilise it from the excluded withouts that nonetheless make up the fabric of its within.

I begin with the work of Franz Fanon, who defends as well as questions the need for a “black consciousness”. The question is, then, one of a raciology at the origin of (self)consciousness. My gesture here is to investigate the ways in which consciousness remains inscribed within raciology, by which I mean the general coordinates — signifying practices, material discourses, forces, affects and schemas — of that which produces “race”. Can “(self)consciousness” be disassociated from raciology? To address this question, I will turn to Foucault’s diagnosis of racial difference at the heart of biopolitics, and read Derrida’s deconstruction of ethnocentrism at the heart of the “white mythology” of Western metaphysics. The question will be Fanon’s: that overcoming the colonisation of consciousness requires “restructuring the world”. But what is the “world”?

The second half of this chapter will turn to the worlds of exodus: abandonments of sociogeographical territories, but also of the white mythology of consciousness. I will draw from the many reinventions of Malcolm X, but also his heretical inheritor, the RZA, Abbot of hip-hop crew the Wu-Tang Clan, a.k.a. Bobby Digital.

But first I begin with Harriet Jacobs, whose narrative explicates several of the underlying problematics that I will attend to here.

Born With A Veil: God-Breathing Machines

Written during the Antebellum era, Jacobs’ *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* [1861] was published a year into the American Civil War. Editor Joslyn T. Pine writes that the narrativisation of the institution’s cruelty fuelled the Abolitionist movement, communicating its aims more effectively than

any rationalist argument at a remove from from the institution's barbarity. Slave narratives, writes Pine, "helped persuade much of antebellum America that slavery was a great blight upon the nation's integrity as a system totally irreconcilable with [the] moral and spiritual values [of white America]" (Jacobs 2001: v). The values of "White America" were, of course, the only valued values in the context of Antebellum slavery, whether those values allowed for it, or condemned it. Jacobs' rhetorical strategy thus carefully tended to the cherished Christian and Victorian-era "values" of chastity and the sanctity of marriage — and emphasised how they were routinely ignored in the sexual abuse of female slaves.

I would like to amplify the force of Jacob's enunciation, for it guides the undertaking of this chapter: *I was nothing but a slave*. In unpacking this phrase, I wish to strategically align its statements with a dialectics of recognition found in Fanon, Du Bois, and of course, Hegel. This circuit of recognition, I should note, is not being posited as an atemporal or universal structure. Rather, it is its production in the context of Jacob's text that is of concern, insofar as it demonstrates the tensions around the construction of "recognition" in a narrativised master/slave relationship.

From Jacobs' narrative we learn that she never thought herself as a slave; it was only the master who did. This tension marks the text: a tension between being recognised as a slave, yet knowing one is not; of having to fight not only physical abuse, but the mental abuse of seeing oneself through the eyes of the master, of losing certainty in one's "self-consciousness" as *unslaved*. Such tension is not abstract; it is enforced by the master, who meets resistance with sexual assault and violence, but also with an order-language: that of the legal coda and its punishments for disobedience.

From Jacobs' text we learn that despite her self-consciousness as *intrinsically* unowned, there remains a movement of self-recognition that unavoidably circuits through the master's language. Jacobs writes

that through these “stinging, scorching words” she saw herself through the eyes of the master, and saw herself as the master did: *as a slave*. This moment of self-recognition *as a slave* is carried through the master’s language, in which “These God-breathing machines are no more, in the sight of their masters, than the cotton they plant, or the horses they tend” (2001: 11).

It is from this phrase that I borrow this chapter’s title: *God-breathing machines*. Below, we will turn to further machinations of theism, as well as becomings incorporating (machinic) theism.

Du Bois theorized that the self-consciousness of the African-American subject¹ circuits through the eyes of the (white) other. Before turning directly to Du Bois, I wish to briefly detour through Fanon’s reading of Hegel, which will aid in reading Du Bois’ own permutation of the master/slave dialectic. At the end of *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon draws our attention to Hegel’s dialectic of recognition between master and slave (Hegel 2003: 104–12). Fanon, for his part, sees Hegel’s dialectic of recognition as compromised by the socioeconomic and “psychopathological” conditions of colonial “inferiority”.

In Hegel’s *The Phenomenology of Mind*,² “self-consciousness” exists in itself and for itself by existing for “another self-consciousness”: it only exists “by being acknowledged or ‘recognized’” (2003: 104). This recognition, it should be stressed, must be mutual. Where it is not — such as between master and slave, “a form of recognition . . . that is one sided and unequal” (2003: 109) — there are two options. Either (1) “they prove themselves or each other by a life-and-death struggle. . . . it is solely by risking life that freedom is obtained; only thus it is tried and proved that the essential nature of self-consciousness is

1. A term I use hesitantly, or rather in hidden quotation marks, to mark the *construction* of this “subject” through the relations described — especially when considering the constitutive aspect of nationalism, in both Du Bois and Hegel.

2. I here use the J.B. Baillie translation, which is the text cited in the Richard Philcox translation of Fanon; unless otherwise noted, references here are to “*The Phenomenology of Mind*” (Hegel 2003), better known as *The Phenomenology of Spirit* (1977).

not bare existence” (Hegel 2003: 107); or (2) the slave must find “consciousness” through “work and labour” (2003: 110), and the master his recognition through the slave (2003: 109). Fear (of the master) is a constitutive principle in this relationship. Too little, and “fear remains formal”; rather, an “absolute fear” is needed for the “consciousness” of the slave to “become objective for itself” (Hegel 2003: 111–12). For Hegel, the master/slave dialectic is not universal (which is to say, neither is mutual recognition — it holds sway only within certain “Nations”, which is to say “races”, as we will see below); it is but “a piece of cleverness which has mastery within a certain range, but not over the universal power nor over the entire objective reality” (2003: 112).

Fanon will see things differently. In a section entitled “*The Black Man and Hegel*”, Fanon quotes from *The Phenomenology of Mind*:

Action from one side [of the dialectic of recognition] only would be useless, because what is to happen can only be brought about by means of both. . . . *They recognize themselves as mutually recognizing each other* (Hegel, in Fanon 2008: 192; Hegel 2003: 105–06).³

3. As an aside, I remind the reader that the section preceding “Realization of self-consciousness through itself” (which further develops the dialectic of “consciousness”) is “Observation of the relation of self-consciousness to its immediate actuality. Physiognomy and Phrenology” (2003: 174–97), in which Hegel, though quasi-critiquing phrenology, proceeds under a racialised geophilosophy that echoes *The Philosophy of History*: “we find a general human shape and form, or at least the general character of a climate” (2003: 176). Hegel will have been a racioclimatologist. Spirit actualises in an “actually existing people”, who are determined by “the Geographical Basis:” despite some ambiguity concerning the “mild Ionic sky . . . we must first take notice of those natural conditions which have to be excluded once for all from the drama of World History. In the Frigid and in the Torrid zone the locality of World-historical peoples cannot be found” (Hegel 1991: 79–80.) Africa will be located in the latter: “At this point we leave Africa, not to mention it again. For it is no historical part of the World; it has no movement or development to exhibit. Historical movements in it — that is in its northern part — belong to the Asiatic or European World” (1991: 99). Hegel’s critique of physiognomy — “the real existence of man is his skull bone” (2003: 189) — applies strictly to the north. In the African south, “cannibalism is looked upon as quite customary and proper” (1991: 95). The other eats the skull bone of the real, or rather, its flesh: “the devouring of human flesh is altogether consonant with the general principles of the African race” (Hegel 1991: 95). It is here that one may begin to meditate on “eating the other” in white mythology, the “*carno-phallogocentrism*” of the subject that Hegel transfers on to the virility of the “Negro other”. Derrida explains how he would like to interrogate “the idealizing interiorization of the phallus and the necessity of its passage through the mouth, where it’s a matter of words or things, of sentences, of daily bread or wine, of the tongue, the lips, or the breast of the other” (Derrida 1995: 280). Fanon points out the phallogocentric contours of white mythology: “As regards the black man everything in fact takes place at the genital level” (2008: 135). Fanon touches upon the eroticisation of the “black athlete” and the “feeling of impotence or sexual inferiority” present in white mythology: “Since virility is taken to be the absolute ideal, doesn’t [the white racist] have a feeling of inadequacy in relation to the black man, who is viewed as a penis symbol?” (2008: 136–37). Hence Hegel’s need to see the other eat himself, auto-carno-fellatio, so as to protect himself (the white racist) from devouring the black phallus: the transference of carno-phallogocentric auto-affection to the other (a.k.a. Hegelian “self-

Fanon's gesture, here, is to emphasise the intersubjectivity of the colonised/coloniser relationship as trumping that of the master/slave dialectic. But there is more at stake. Paraphrasing, but also twisting Hegel, Fanon writes that "Man is human only to the extent to which he tries to impose himself on another man in order to be recognized by him" (2008: 191). What does it mean for Fanon to align the figure of the "human" with that of an imposition, a force or violence that suggests the position of the master, and not an intersubjective, mutual recognition?

On the one hand, Fanon appears to strategically conflate the master/slave dialectic with that of mutual recognition: "man is human" only to the extent that he becomes a *master*, and *forces* others to be recognised by him. Fanon reveals the inherent violence to the colonised/coloniser relationship, and stakes out the grounds in which to agitate, and justify, the imposition of recognition upon the coloniser by the colonised.

On the other hand, Fanon calls into question the philosophy of the "human", suggesting that humanism always requires force to achieve recognition: that no *mutual* intersubjectivity can take place upon the grounds of Enlightenment philosophy without forceful, or enforced, recognition. Thus this one sentence also critiques Hegel's separation of the two dialectics, just as, at the same time, it reads Hegel as the "master" of a philosophy — "white mythology" — that Fanon sees as emblematic of colonialism itself.⁴

At stake here, however, is a rejection of the dialectical framework entirely. The rejection of Hegel's dialectical schema by Fanon is emphasised by Michelle M. Wright, who summarises that "Fanon is rejecting the possibility of idealist dialectics, providing a space in which the Black subject can realize

consciousness").

4. In *Becoming Black*, Michelle M. Wright

himself. Fanon's white mask was created by and for the colonizer and therefore possesses no aspect . . . through which a Black can achieve subjectivity on white terms" (2004: 116). I extend Fanon's (ambiguous) rejection of "idealist dialectics" to a questioning of white mythology, thereby leaving more open-ended what Wright names "the Black subject". As Wright also notes, in Fanon's text "Black women, as agents, disappear altogether" (2004: 124). Though Fanon addresses "Black women" elsewhere, the exclusion of gender structures Fanon's theories of subjectivity (as it does Du Bois): "gender is an integral dynamic in the production of identity in the era of colonization" (2004: 125). As in Hegel, the transcendental subject masks its assumed heteropatriarchal masculinity; this is the meaning of its phallogocentrism. The consequence of Fanon and Du Bois' focus on race (to the exclusion of gender) is a duplication of the "white subject in the Western nation" in a theorisation of the Black (male) subject under "heterosexual, and masculine norms" (Wright 2004: 6). Afrofuturism will not necessarily provide an exit from phallogocentrism or patriarchy (see the section on RZA below) though, constitutively, its becoming is shaped *through* gender troubles, as I touched upon in chapter three.

But this rejection will already have been framed by Hegel himself. Hegel will deny certain "peoples" the master/slave dialectic — namely Africans. Fanon's retooling of Hegel to construct a theory of intersubjectivity follows from a rejection of idealist dialectics prepared by Hegel. In a sense, Hegel has outlined a schema of philosophical entrapment for those he excludes from being eligible for the master/slave dialectic. But Fanon's reading suggests another path, one not unlike the Afrofuturist undercurrent in the deconstructive affirmation of dehumanisation: the affirmation of this entrapment in providing an exodus, or line of flight, from the philosophical *grounds*. For Fanon, this will lead to a repurposing of

Hegel against Hegel in the development of intersubjectivity, but it will also infer a minor reading of his text, one in which the schema of the *human* is likewise rejected as but an artifact of Hegel's ruse.

For beneath Hegel's master/slave dialectic is a pit into which the other is cast. Hegel argues that self-consciousness finds its "complete reality in fulfilment in the life of a nation" (2003: 200). Self-consciousness must not only circuit through the recognition of the other, but fulfill itself in the nation, where "reason appears here as the fluent universal substance" (2003: 200). A brief note on the "universal" from *Philosophy of History*: the "African" is excluded from it. "The peculiarly African character is difficult to comprehend, for the very reason that in reference to it, we must quite give up the principle which naturally accompanies all *our* ideas — the category of Universality" (Hegel 1991: 93). In Hegel, the Eurocentric signifier of belonging — "our" — is ethnonationalised: it signals the Northern climes, Europe and Asia. Martinique, as the Antilles, are "Torrid" climes, and undoubtedly excluded from the dramaturgy of World History (Hegel 1991: 80). It is in this context that Hegel's remarks on slavery ought to be read:

Negroes are enslaved by Europeans and sold to America. Bad as this may be, their lot in their own land is even worse, since there a slavery quite as absolute exists; for it is the essential principle of slavery, that man has not yet attained a consciousness of his freedom, and consequently sinks down to a mere Thing — an object of no value (1991: 96).

In Africa, peoples are always already Things. But objects, they deserve their fate. Being forcefully abducted as slaves is but one step closer to becoming Europeanised enough to enter into the master/slave dialectic. It is from this paragraph that the logic of an "always already" dehumanisation is at work: only unhumans are dehumanised to begin with, and so deserve their fate. Such "subhumans" are not

even deserving of the master/slave dialectic: “Slavery is in and for itself *injustice*; for the essence of humanity is *Freedom*; but for this man must be matured” (Hegel 1991: 99).

We can now re-read Fanon’s phrase that “Man is human only to the extent to which he tries to impose himself on another man in order to be recognized by him” (2008: 191). This phrase can be read in Fanon’s *Afrofuturist* inflection: insofar as the “human” *demand*s a logic of recognition, it requires the *imposition* upon on an-other. But as Fanon wrote at the start to *Black Skin, White Masks*: “a Black is not a man” (2008: xii). Being-human means forcing the other(s) to recognise you. This is the “human” imposition of the coloniser, not the “Black”. Fanon will echo this point vis-à-vis Hegel:

... the master here [in (post)colonialism] is basically different from the one described by Hegel. For Hegel there is reciprocity; here the master scorns the consciousness of the slave. What he wants from the slave is not recognition but work. Likewise, the slave here can in no way be equated with the slave who loses himself in the object and finds the source of liberation in his work. The black slave wants to be like his master. Therefore he is less independent than the Hegelian slave. For Hegel, the slave turns away from the master and towards the object. Here the slave turns toward the master and abandons the object (fn. 10, Fanon 2008: 195).

Fanon complicates Hegel’s master/slave dialectic in colonial relations. The slave is not solely driven by fear of the master to toil at the object of work, but rather desires to become the master, to be “*like*” the master. Thus in anticolonial revolt the slave will impose recognition upon the master so as to usurp the master’s power — but also, as developed in Bhabha’s reading of Fanon, to *mimic* the master (1994). But there is, again, a minor reading to be had wherein the slave rejects Fanon’s schema of desire and mimicry. Where the slave observes, as if from a third position, the collective process of desire and mimicry, and rejects both the object of work, as proposed by Hegel, and the subject of attraction, as

proposed by Fanon. For such a position would be, perhaps, that of Fanon himself: caught in an uncertain, nearly impossible rejection of wanting to become master *or* slave.

For Hegel, what falls outside of or beneath the slave is not even deserving of *Arbeit macht frei*. We can imagine that Hegel would read Fanon as saying as much. This reprehensible thesis would tell the black slave that it is “its” own fault for not “losing himself in the object of work”. The black slave would not be “mature” enough for the master/slave dialectic. This “mature” philosophical logic — of, in common parlance, “blaming the victim” — insidiously replicates itself everywhere.⁵

Fanon’s text is wrought by a tension: of desiring neither to be within the master/slave relation, nor without. The latter rejection is formulated, crucially, from observing the pitfalls of its unthought exterior, insofar as it leads to desiring, and mimicking, the very repressive logic that upholds its hierarchy of exclusion and dialectical violence. As Kelly Oliver writes of Fanon on this question, it is “within racist culture the black man is not rendered a man, [thus] what Hegel says about man does not apply to the black man of colonial ideology” (Oliver 2003: 177). Outside of the master/slave dialectic, the slave cannot find recognition in work or from the master. Colonisation produces a situation where the “former slave [who] wants to *have himself recognized*” (2008: 191) — and paradoxically so by becoming the figure of his own oppression. It is a problematic of the *neither/nor* that Fanon identifies.

So arises, I suggest, the third option of a minor reading in Fanon: the deconstructive affirmation of a double negation. What the former slave “recognises”, or can impossibly affirm only by embracing neither the dialectic nor the desire, is that “he is not a man”. What becomes of this “black man”, then? I would

5. For a further discussion of these points, see Robert Bernasconi and Sybol Cook’s edited volume, *Race & Racism in Continental Philosophy* (2003). As for the phenomenon of blaming the victim, it persists in the ideology of blaming the poor for being poor; of blaming immigrants for being immigrants (for “not speaking the language”, doing things differently, wearing different clothes, etc.); of blaming young black men for being young black men (Trayvon Martin); of blaming addicts for being addicts (by denying prescription heroin, etc.).

like to suggest the threads of this minor, perhaps heretical, reading: that the remainder of Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* attempts to address this question by theorising its socioeconomic and pedagogical conditions in colonialism, its strategic responses in Negritude, and above all, the cultural particularity of "man": *whose* (hue)man?

Kelly Oliver, reading Fanon's critique of Hegel, writes that "the ideal [of mutual human recognition] becomes corrupt and pathological in the colonial situation" (2003: 178).⁶ My point, however, as I believe is also an Afrofuturist inflection of Fanon's, is not that the ideal of mutual human recognition is *corrupted* by colonialism: its boundaries of racialised exclusion are constituted by it. Fanon demonstrates how the "human" presupposed and constituted by Hegel's dialectic of mutual recognition can only *exist* by *imposing* its recognition upon an other who is non-mutual, the slave — an exclusion that, reading Hegel's *Philosophy of History*, includes another: what is beneath the slave, the "African". Fanon's attempt to reject Hegel, but also to observe and reject the colonial desire to become the master, returns to the thesis I explore here: that there is not a "human ideal", formed in mutual recognition, that is corrupted, or befallen, by slavery and colonialism. Colonialism and slavery are coterminous to the humanist philosophy in which these "pernicious institutions" are structurally inscribed — the totality of which I will call, after Derrida, "white mythology".

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Born with a Veil. Let us now turn to Du Bois and the theory of double-consciousness. Like Fanon's "former slave", Du Bois' "Negro", denied humanity, bears witness to the *circuit* of recognition. Consciousness, and crucially the consciousness of being conscious in self-consciousness, is always a

6. Oliver further develops this argument in *The Colonization of Psychic Space* (2004).

“double-consciousness”, a consciousness that bears witness to the way in which its consciousness is recognised — or rather, unrecognised, belittled, negated — by the master-other. For Du Bois, the “Negro” is “born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world — a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world” (1994: 2). There is no *true* self-consciousness, says Du Bois. Self-consciousness is always possessed by the *other world*, is always measured by and against the *other world*. The other world holds the ruler to which all subjects much measure up, in that “measuring [of] one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in contempt or pity” (Du Bois 1994: 2). I would here like to underscore the relationship that Du Bois draws between self-consciousness, the white other, and the other world: it is the confluence of the three that produces double-consciousness. The confluence suggests, then, that to challenge double-consciousness will likewise require challenging this “other world” and its other.

From the abstraction of double consciousness, I would like to turn to a few examples of its complexity, wherein slaves acted in ways that masked motivation, wherein the doubling of consciousness and its circuit through the other reveal conflicting accounts of master/slave relations.

For Jacobs’ master, Dr. Flint, the slaves are but property, equivalent to animals and crops, nothing but organic machines.⁷ But Jacobs knows that she is not property, even as she sees herself as a “God-breathing machine”. The paradox Jacobs identifies is that of the more complex reading of Du Bois’ double consciousness: that Jacobs is only ever “recognised” by the “other world” *insofar as she is a slave*; but Jacobs recognises she is *not* a slave, not in-herself. In her self-recognition, she is alienated from the self — her-self — “recognised” by the master’s other world. She is conscious of her Alien Nation.

7. Fanon will call the slave (sarcastically) an “animal-machine” (2008: 194). Such denigrated epithets become escapes of alter-becoming in the Afrofuturist reading of dehumanisation.

But it is not the master's words that, in the last instance, subdue her; ultimately it takes an unleashing of violence that strikes the flesh and penetrates the body as property.⁸ Jacob's text, carefully composed and edited, nonetheless reveals this striking of violence, in which her body is possessed by the master: "Never before had my puny arm felt half so strong", she writes, signifying all that the paragraph does not say, all that has been left to resonate in the italics that cry out behind the phrase. "I was made for his use, made to obey his command in *every* thing" (Jacobs 2001: 18). But this did not last: Harriet Jacobs strategically cultivates the affections of a white neighbour, with whom she has two children. She then proceeds to hide in her grandmother's attic for seven long years before undertaking her exodus to the North.

How is it that "slaves" resist? There are two points I wish to note here. The first is the role of pedagogy and class. The second is that of gender and sexuality.

1. *The education of class (consciousness)*. Somewhat unusually, Jacobs' family was educated. The question I wish to raise here is of pedagogy, but a pedagogy that has been interpreted as a class division — and thus one of "class" consciousness. As the introduction to Jacobs' narrative notes, "the slaves who learned to read and write were the first to run away" (2001: vi). Jacob's assertion must be brought to bear upon the class distinction, pejoratively made by Malcolm X, between "house" and "field negroes". For Malcolm X, "house negroes", more educated and privileged, were more obedient to the master, while the underclass of field slaves bore no such allegiance.⁹ For Malcolm X, the underclass had

8. Returning to Hegel in *Phenomenology of Spirit*, the circuit in which the "I" exists solely "for others" is that of language (1977: 308–09). This is Hegel's discussion of language as alienation, *Entfremdung*, in which "It [language] is the power of speech, as that which performs what has to be performed. For it is the *real existence* of the pure self as self; in speech, self-consciousness, *qua independent separate individuality*, comes as such into existence, so that it exists *for others*. Otherwise the 'I', this *pure* 'I', is non-existent, is not *there* . . ." (1977: 308–09). The "pure self as self" in language will be interrogated below. I quote Hegel here to note that, where the "I" resists, conscious of its Alien Nation, where it disappears as it does not want to be "for (the) other", there the master abandons words and "appropriates" the absent "I" through (phallogocentric) violence.

9. This scene is dramatized in Spike Lee's 1992 film as a television debate with a liberal black intellectual that X insinuates is a "house

revolutionary consciousness of their enslavement, while the “house negro”, *integrated* into the Big House, was blinded with the false consciousness of privilege.

Yet, contrary to Malcolm X’s polarising critique, Booker T. Washington’s account of his plantation upbringing, *Up From Slavery*, suggests that “field negroes” harboured “tenderness and sympathy” for their masters, as a “result of their kindly and generous nature” (1995: 6–7). Indeed, Washington writes that “the members of my race entertain no feelings of bitterness against the whites before and during the war”, going so far as to detail the sorrow that slaves felt for their wounded masters, and how after the war, many “Negroes tenderly [cared] for their former masters and mistresses” (1995: 6–7). Washington describes the “honour” of staying in the Big House: “The slave who was selected to sleep in the ‘big house’ during the absence of the males was considered to have the place of honour” (1995: 7).

I do not suggest taking Washington’s account at face value — for it appears to strategically serve a political purpose in obfuscating slave rebellion and exodus — nor would I suggest that it is immune from Malcolm X’s critique. But this is neither to suggest that X’s critique is historically accurate. The strategic, if not polemical deployment and writing of “history”, here, suggests a multiplicity of conflicting narratives. But do these polarising positions erase another narrative? Du Bois’ problematic of double consciousness suggests a broader problematic: the retroactive obfuscation of historical movements that sought to restructure the “other world”: movements of *insurrection* and *exodus*. As previously discussed, Hahn has suggested that Reconstruction-era accounts of slavery sought to downplay slave revolts and insurrections during the Civil War because “the rights and power that African Americans gained during Reconstruction came under increasingly ferocious attack” (2009:

negro”. See also “Malcolm X: The House Negro and the Field Negro”, accessed 9 July 2011: <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=znQe9nUKzvQ>>.

105). Speaking of Washington, Hahn writes that “some bent over backward to find a conciliatory posture” (2009: 105), so as to deflect the wrath that would arise if the truth be known: that, as Genovese argues, slaves defected from their plantations in greater numbers than had been supposed, particularly the so-called “house negroes”:

The great shock to the planters came with the defection of their most trusted and pampered slaves — the drivers and especially the more intimate of the house servants. . . . The slaveholders might reconcile themselves to the defection of their field hands, for it struck at their pocketbooks but not at their self-esteem. They could explain the exodus from the fields by reasoning that these were inexperienced, simple people whom the Yankees could mislead. No such reasoning would serve to explain the behavior of the house slaves or the drivers. Their desertion, in the minds of the slaveholders, constitute the essence of ingratitude, of unfaithfulness, of disloyalty, of treason (Genovese 1976: 98–99).

I raise these points in an attempt to further complicate the contested historical terrain in which any consideration of slave, or double “consciousness” might take place. The heterogeneity of positions, and their shadowing strategies nonetheless reflect the theoretical utility of thinking this heterogeneity through double-consciousness: that there are polarisations, divisions, and doublings that veil agencies, that obfuscate motivations, and that suggest a thoroughly complex problematic that cannot be reduced to a universalised “consciousness”. The thought of such a “consciousness” is thus always doubled, turning upon itself through the *other world*. The thought of consciousness is thus always implicated within the privileging of axes of difference through that *other world*. Thus Fanon’s injunction that any thought of changing “consciousness” requires restructuring that *other world*.

Malcolm X, free of the Nation of Islam, would come to reverse his position: “any slave, if he is

educated, will no longer fear his master. History shows that any educated slave always begins to ask, and next demand, equality with his master” (1999: 273).

2. *Gender/Sexuality*. Jacobs’ account draws attention to the systemic abuse of black women, offering a personal chronicle of the ways in which women were “subject to routine rape” by slaveowners (2001: vi). Female slave bodies were objects of desire and pleasure for their masters, as well as organic machines for the reproduction of future chattel. In the equation of labouring bodies with capital, women were integral to the reproduction of the next generation of forced labour. As Pine reiterates, their progeny increased the wealth of their masters (in Jacobs 2001: vi). Women’s bodies generated the next round of labouring capital. This logic has continued through to today: “the produced commodities” of capitalist “reproductive engineering”, writes Gayatri Spivak, “are children” (1999: 387).¹⁰

As a black female, Jacobs is subject to what might be characterised as a double deprivileging: that of the subaltern feminine within an authoritarian slave structure whose paternalism is patriarchal and violently phallogocentric. Sexual abuse is the violent means by which the feminine body is harnessed for the reproduction of slaves.

In generalising from the singularity of Jacobs’ narrative to the doubly-deprivileged reproductive

10. I was drawn to Spivak here, because she points out the difference between contemporary capitalist modes of exploitation and slavery: “It should at least be obvious that the abusive constitution of the body in chattel slavery is not the socialization of the body in exploitation. The matrilineality of slavery cannot be used as an affective alibi for the commodification of reproductive labour power” (Spivak 1999: 389). Spivak is in the midst of critiquing Rosalind Pollack Petchesky, who is reading Farida Akhter (a Bangladeshi activist), only to silence/substitute the latter for Carole Pateman (Spivak 1999: 386). The intricacies of this reading revolve around how Petchesky substitutes “woman” for “power”, just as how she substitutes Pateman’s critique for that of Akhter’s. By substituting the reproductive capacity of “natural woman” for the Marxist distinction of “natural [i.e. labour] power”, Petchesky is able to critique Pateman’s Akhter for closing in on the “essentialized embrace of ‘difference’ by radical feminists [more] than her Marxis[m]” (Petchesky 1995: 395). (I apologise in due haste: I am condensing an already dense argument.) As Spivak points out, this substitution misses the point: Akhter, “as a person working against the depredations of capitalist/individualist reproductive engineering . . . is daily aware that reproductive laborpower has been socialized” (1999: 387). For Spivak, such “U.S. personalism cannot think Marx’s risky formulation of the resistant use of socialized labor-power”, and more to our purposes: “Further, since its implied subject is the agent of rights-based bourgeois liberalism, it cannot think of the owned body from the proletariat perspective, as a dead end road” (1999: 387–88). Afrofuturism will just the same reject, or at least abandon, the coordinates of the rights-based discourse, that of “bourgeois liberalism” qua the “Enlightenment”.

function of the feminised body under slavery, I nonetheless wish to register a note of caution raised by Spivak: “In search of ‘our’ culture in the history of the present, we encounter another ‘pre-national’ group thrust into the dubious ‘unity’ of a statistical collective: subaltern women” (Spivak 1999: 385). The problematic is that of the assumed “unity” of the “statistical collective”: that the perspective granted here to reading a singularity as a statistic reflects the very racialised logic of biopower. I will turn to the problematic of race, inscribed within the core of biopower, below. Spivak’s caution, however, suggests the need to read the singular in its particularity, but a particularity that is not statistical, but synecdoche for the universal.

Institutional patriarchy — whose conceptual discourse I will call, after Derrida, “phallogocentrism”, signalling a metaphysical *violence* privileging the phallus (of) presence¹¹ — raises the question of “feminine consciousness” just as raciology raises that of “black consciousness”. The problematic here, as for Afrocentrism, is situating a difference without essentialising it. Does not the question of sexual difference, *qua* “racial” difference, structure an essentialism within the living flesh? The Afrofuturist abandonment of consciousness — the exodus from the privileged ossification of Eurocentric humanism that nonetheless does not abandon its sign, or the potential of “consciousness” to be transformed otherwise — risks becoming (as Fanon warned) not alien but “white” (2008: xiv)¹² — but also, *masculinised* white.

11. Geoffrey Bennington will define phallogocentrism as “that philosophy relegate[s] sexual difference to the status of an object of a regional science on the pretext of a transcendental neutrality which in fact has always veiled a privilege of the masculine” (1993: 206). See Derrida’s *Spurs*, in particular, where Derrida reads Nietzsche as excluding “woman” from the question (and field) of truth, from the question of the *who*: “the truth, as regards her, does not concern her in the least” (1979: 63). This exclusion from the question of the *who*, I will suggest below, is also that of “race”.

12. In the Introduction to *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon writes “As painful as it is for us to have to say this: there is but one destiny for the black man. And it is white” (2008: xiv). The meaning of this statement is teased. Intellectually, it is the confrontation with Sartre, in which Negritude is but a negative mode toward the syntheses of “races” (Fanon 2008: 111–19). But here Fanon begins to elaborate upon violence, a topic he will take up later when justifying revolutionary anticolonial violence in the context of the Algerian struggle for independence. Hence the Afrofuturist teasing of a third way: the abandonment of earth, in the heart of Fanon’s Negritude, by Césaire.

Fanon's problematic is that, in the evacuation of imaginary blackness as substantive content of a "black consciousness", the resulting consciousness will have defaulted to white hegemony. The evacuation of the feminine would suggest the same: that its absence defaults to the hegemony of phallogocentrism. Wherever the deprivileged term is critiqued for its "essentialism", its evacuation reinforces, and reiterates, the privileged hegemony to which all "essentialisms" are positioned — *unless* that "other world" is likewise, and thoroughly, restructured.

The question of "consciousness" is complicated by the differences that its privileging everywhere institutes. Who is properly conscious? Who or what is not? Do such deprivileged differences fall "outside" of the "consciousness" that differentiates the "human" from other species? Or are they constitutive of it? Though my persistent line of questioning in this chapter is that of race, I do not seek to deprioritise the question of gender and sexuality — or rather, of any "difference" that would *befall* the "human ideal", howsoever deprivileged¹³ — when theorising the functioning of differences. All differences fall under a general metaphysical logic of exclusionary ordering wherein one term of a difference is privileged over another. In what follows I will seek to delve directly into the violence of this metaphysical logic.

Madly racing to and from consciousness: dispossessing Foucault and Fanon

It is through image and fantasy — those orders that figure transgressively on the borders of history and the unconscious — that Fanon most profoundly evokes the colonial condition

13. Including disability. I return to Hegel's comments on the "general form" of the human in the *Phenomenology of Mind* noted above: "we find a general human shape and form, or at least the general character of a climate" (2003: 176). Hegel's ideal of mutual recognition would also rely upon a privileged "human shape and form".

(Bhabha 1986: xxvi).

With consciousness, we approach an undeniably loaded term — but also a signifier that echoes throughout Afrodiasporic thought, precisely because of the systemic discrimination that has robbed Afrodiasporic *infrahumans* — Paul Gilroy’s term for humans designated as less than human by racism (2004) — of consciousness. Hence its loadedness: “consciousness” is loaded with assumptions as to who possesses it, and who does not. However, can one, as if consciousness were a property, “possess” it? Or is one “possessed” by it? The common rhetoric around “possessing” consciousness reveal a complex of racialised, propertarian, and occult inflections. The question of possession raises even more problematic self-doubt for bioraciologies that assume consciousness as intrinsically unpossessed by the racialised other. Colonial and postslavery pedagogy suggest that infrahumans unpossessed of consciousness can strangely be educated to its possession. The contradictions that result from bioraciology, as I will explore below, amplify the dualities of double consciousness into ever more estranged forms.

Yet, as Rey Chow argues in *The Protestant Ethic* (2002), and as Paul Gilroy has emphasised (2004), it is not only racialised biological essentialism that determines who is granted the privilege of human subjectivity and its deracialised consciousness. Bioraciological truth-discourses are translated into constructions of “ethnicity”, wherein bioracial “science” has been shifted to the domain of “culture” — the latter itself a loaded signifier, slippery and indistinct. Here, the “culture” of the “ethnic”, though denying its equivalence to “race”, nonetheless stands in for it, as if its supposedly soft plasticity masks the hard determinism lurking beneath. “From biology”, writes Chow, “the problematic of racism has been displaced onto the realm of culture, so that it is the insurmountability of cultural identity, or cultural difference, that has become the justification for racist, discriminatory conduct” (2002: 13).

Yet again, regardless of the discursive construction of racism/ethnocentrism, the force of discrimination revolves precisely around (self-)consciousness as determining privileged access to the (supposedly) superior domain of the human. Here, argues Chow, critical pedagogy fails us: “Despite the obvious dehumanisation that accompanies the objectification of ethnicity, I believe we would be naive to suppose that, simply with the proper kind of education, we would be able to stop objectifying our others once and for all” (2002: 50). The construct of race is, quite simply, part and parcel with the assembly of the subject itself. The non-conscious other is unhuman for “reasons” that continue to undermine liberal programmes that endorse tolerance, multiculturalism, or progressive education, whatever their merits. That raciology persists even when masquerading as the discourses of tolerance that uphold “ethnicity” and the rhetoric of “cultural difference” suggests that the problematic is more deeply rooted — precisely because, as Fanon attempts to characterise in the “lived experience” of “inferiority” (2008: 90), it “possesses” the roots of what structures the “self-consciousness” of the “subject”. Are we not faced with the problem identified by Fanon, where

From the moment the black man accepts the split imposed by the Europeans, there is no longer any respite; and “from that moment on, isn’t it understandable that he will try to elevate himself to the white man’s level? To elevate himself into the range of colors to which he has attributed a kind of hierarchy?” (Claude Nordey, quoted in Fanon 2008: 63)

Fanon’s solution, as always, embraces the impulsiveness of the unforeseeable future, but one whose energy reverberates with Afrofuturist trajectories of un-earthing:

We shall see that another solution is possible. It implies restructuring the world (Fanon 2008: 63).

For Fanon there can be no ontology of this problematic. “Any ontology is made impossible in a

colonized and acculturated society”, writes Fanon: “In the *weltanschauung* of a colonized people, there is an impurity or flaw that prohibits any ontological explanation”, insofar as it “ignores the lived experience” (2008: 89–90). But here, a little further below, I will turn to situating ontology. I will do so because ontology cannot help from being grasped at in, or *through*, lived experience. Ontology will be a provincial discourse. It is to ontology, then, that the question of “(self)consciousness” descends, down to the basement of Being in Western metaphysics. But I must first begin the descent with a detour.

Permit me to return to my guiding question. When interrogating the raciological question “*who* is conscious?”, we are led to partition the *who* from the *what*. Asking “what” beings are conscious already separates that non-thing, a *who* that *is* (conscious) from a *who is not* (conscious). The *who-is-not* (conscious) is just no-thing but a thing, a *what*. “Consciousness” is essential to the humanist logic that divides the *what* from the *who*, a procedure that mimics itself everywhere: the thing from the subject, the other from the self, the “extensions of man” from “man”. While “I think”, the “other things” do not.

What are the raciological effects of the above, abstracted, thought of the *who/what* distinction? I would like to speculate upon the following thesis in its general form: that whomever “possesses consciousness” determines as much by producing, rounding up, and then excluding — through incarceration, institutionalisation, exile, or enslavement — those who do not. But what does one do when the racialised other, subhuman, without consciousness, can be *taught*? As Foucault details in *History of Madness*, there arises a vicious circle, a double-bind, where in the problematic of madness, the insane are confined because they are mad, even though it is recognised that confinement leads to insanity: “Through a paradoxical circle, madness finally appeared as the sole reason for confinement, while serving as a symbol of its deep unreason” (Foucault 2006: 400). Though Foucault is here speaking

of eighteenth century France, he anticipates the *biopolitical* logic I will explicate below to generalise the proposition: prison makes men mad; the mad are locked up in prison. I turn here to Foucault because other forms of inhuman confinement — colonialism, but in particular, plantation slavery — can be thought under a similar logic. This is also to suggest, then, that Foucault's concept of biopower names a racialised structuring — of racialisation and accounting, of encampments and the statistical ordering of unhumans — that precedes the *formal* development of biological racism in the nineteenth century.

Fanon's concerns lie precisely with the attempt to generalise a theory of colonial pathology. We might re-read Foucault, replacing "madness" with "slavery", where the latter is "a symbol of its blind, arbitrary nature, and a justification of all that was reasonable well founded within it" (2006: 400).

There is a second point here to be made through Foucault, where, in *The History of Madness*, he briefly discusses colonialism. The mad are, after being confined, sent off to the colonies:

Now people were sent into confinement as a prelude to being 'sent to the Islands.' The intention was to force a mobile population to move abroad and work the newly colonised lands, and confinement became a warehouse of migrants to be sent to a chosen destination when the time was ripe (Foucault 2006: 402).

There are confinements, which is to say, dispossessions, operating at multiple levels. The supposedly mad, dispossessed of consciousness, are sent to the colonies. The colonised are dispossessed of their land and their consciousness. But the mad have been confined because, to begin with, they too were dispossessed of collectively held grounds of production, what Foucault details, in the next paragraph, as "the progressive disappearance, in both England and France, of common land" (2006: 402). How many of the "mad" are impoverished migrants, imprisoned for "crimes" committed once they lost their source

of livelihood? How many were subsequently “deported” to the colonies as white labour, only to become overseers and masters?

We have now begun to grasp the meaning of Fanon when he writes how, observing the colonial situation in Martinique, there are two classes of slaves: “the black man, slave to his inferiority, and the white man, slave to his superiority” (2008: 42). These are two extremes and unequal in power, to be sure. But both remain enslaved to a regime that dispossesses and possesses. Obviously one cannot generalise Foucault’s historical tracing of the production of madness, nor Fanon’s pathology of colonialism, to an ahistorical, transnational rationale of what are power imbalances between regimes of suffering. But my point here is that these coinciding lines of analysis, Foucault/Fanon, colonialism and madness, both revolve around regimes of possession, and of property, that appear intimately bound up with gestures of confinement and exclusion, of dispossession. Those unpossessed of consciousness do not, under this raciology — and the similarities and differences of pathology to raciology, though tantalising, will have to be thought elsewhere — “deserve” their own property, including the possession and property of self.

The question, however, is whether the structure of racialised exclusion is particular, an errant deviation from the Enlightenment production of the human subject that can be rectified, where a universal humanism can invite in all “races”, even those competing “humanisms”, in a familial bond of species-being, or whether raciology is directly tied to the production of the human subject. And if “race” is not constitutive of the human subject — if it is but that deviation, a fleck of evil in the erstwhile ethical good of humanism — where exactly does it take place? Does one hierarchise “race” as less significant, say, than other differences noted in the human pantheon, or as supplementary to them, a manufactured afterthought of bioraciology, eugenics, and science gone wrong? But if race is secondary

to other, more primary differences — sexual difference; ontico/ontological difference; etc. — is one not hierarchising an order of difference(s)? *Who* or *what* determines the order of things — which is above all, an order of the *who* to the *what*.

Biopolitics: the state of racism

As Foucault observed in *The Order of Things*, the categorising, ordering and tabling of the subject “man” took place by exiling its peripheral others, the madman and the poet (2010). One would expect a consideration of “race” in such an ordering. But as Chow observes,¹⁴ Foucault conspicuously avoids, for the most part, addressing the technologies and discourses of exclusion productive of “race” — a “category” that would appear to be the *arche*-condition for classifying the insane, the criminal, or the sexual deviant in the very “birth of Man”. Chow, drawing upon the work of Ann Laura Stoller’s *Race and the Education of Desire* (1995), likewise points out how Foucault avoids “a consideration of the impact of European colonialism on the historical emergence of the European bourgeois order” (2002: 8). I would, in this section, like to address both of these points.

One of few places where Foucault draws attention to “race” is in his 17th March, 1976 lecture at the Collège de France, in which Foucault situates the question of “race” within the framework of *life* and *death*. He turns to race specifically when posing the problem of organised violence at the level of atomic weaponry, where “the atom bomb represents the deployment of a sovereign power that kills, but is also the power to kill life itself” (2003: 253).

This lecture is mostly read, however, as the groundwork for Foucault’s concept of “bio-politics” as

14. And Denise Ferreria da Silva, whom I will turn to below (2007).

introduced in *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1* (1990). I would like to backtrack a little in Foucault's lecture, as biopolitics and race are, as Chow will demonstrate, intrinsically entwined. The discussion of race occurs after assessing a historical shift in the politics of control: from "disciplinary" modes of power to "biopolitical" forms of population control.¹⁵

Disciplinary modes of power, argues Foucault, individualise the subject through the "spatial distribution of individual bodies (their separation, their alignment, their serialization, and their surveillance) and the organization, around those individuals, of a whole field of visibility" (2003: 242). As Foucault discusses in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1995), the construction of prisons (but also schools, factories, barracks, asylums, and hospitals) regulate individual behaviour (the panopticon is always watching) by internalising self-discipline through the suspicion of surveillance. Punishment is administered at the level of the individual, shifting from spectacular forms of execution and torture to the reformism of the panoptical prison. In short, "disciplines, for their part, dealt with individuals and their bodies in practical terms" (Foucault 2003: 245).

Foucault identifies "biopolitics", however, as the first attempt to think the totality of "man", and above all, to quantify through statistical analysis, the production of "man-as-species", a rendering homogeneous of individualised bodies into "a global mass that is affected by overall processes characteristic of birth, death, production, illness, and so on" (2003: 242–43):

Biopolitics deals with the population, with the population as a political problem, as a problem that is at once scientific and political, as a biological problem and as power's problem (Foucault

15. It should be noted that Foucault emphasises that biopolitics does not supersede disciplinary control, but rather incorporates it: "it does dovetail into it, integrate it, modify it to some extent, and above all, use it by infiltrating it, embedding itself in existing disciplinary techniques. This new technique does not simply do away with the disciplinary technique, because it exists at a different level, on a different scale..." (2003: 242).

2003: 245).

Here one encounters the management techniques, “forecasts, statistical estimates, and overall measures” of population control, focusing upon attempts to “medicalize the population”, to counter the incapacities of *labouring* bodies: sickness, old age, “accidents, infirmities, and various anomalies” (2003: 246, 244). The “last domain” of biopolitics is total: the attempt to control “relations between the human race, or human beings insofar as they are a species, insofar as they are living beings, and their environment, the milieu in which they live” (Foucault 2003: 245). In all of these domains, I would suggest, is the implementation of *raciology*. Or rather, the structural function of “race” as the very “general” thought of “man-as-species”. Speaking of Foucault’s concept of biopolitics, Paul Gilroy emphasises the “scientific principles upon which populations were to be divided and ranked by ‘race’”, even as he cautions that “we should not underplay the mystical and irrational counterpoints to scientific raciology” (2004: 67).¹⁶

Here I wish to amend Foucault’s periodisation of biopolitics as emerging in the nineteenth, and particularly twentieth century. This perhaps heretical suggestion follows from Baucom, who details how certain percentages of the slave population were marked, or expected, “for” death during the Middle Passage; how slaves were not just bought and sold, but borrowed against, and with interest, as “one of the era’s primary investment vehicles”, in the genesis of financial capital; and how the reproductive capacity of slaves were factored into their commodifiable, and thus monetary value (Baucom 2005: 59–64, 63). It is the economic activity of Atlantic slavery itself, in its accounting for *forced labour*, and with its tallies of slave populations in exactly the terms that Foucault describes that resituates the birth of

16. Today, argues Gilroy, biopolitics has descended beneath the skin with microbiology and genomics, wherein “biopolitics [has] laid the foundations for and [has been] superseded by ‘nano-politics’” (2004: 48).

biopolitics, in the figure of the slave subject \$, to the inauguration of modern, Atlantic, slavery.

I would like to amplify the thinking of “race” in Foucault, however, by turning again to Rey Chow, who thinks “race” alongside, or rather implicated within, Foucault’s concept of sexuality. Chow (and I think correctly) points out that “sexuality” in Foucault’s *The History of Sexuality* is too often read in the narrow sense, as “sexual intercourse, sex acts, and erotics” (2002: 7). Yet the concept of sexuality is drawn precisely from the general analytic of biopower/politics, where

sexuality is no longer clearly distinguishable from the entire problematic of the reproduction of human life that is, in modern times, always racially and ethnically inflected. Race and ethnicity are thus coterminous with sexuality, just as sexuality is implicated in race and ethnicity (2002: 7).

The question of where to situate “racial” difference to “sexual” difference is broached here: Chow positions such differences as coterminous to the “generality” of biopolitics that is the very power-politics of managing generality. And this generality, as observed above, is coordinated toward the prolonging of *life*, dealing with all that befalls it through medicalisation and population control, of attempting, in the last instance, to contain and manage *death*. The question that Foucault poses, then, is how does a power-politics of *life* produce *death*? How does biopolitics arrive at atomic weaponry, at the point where it produces the power to obliterate life itself? This question, however, perhaps began with the modern production of racialised slavery. The problematic of biopolitics is that it puts all in service of life, “so much so”, explicates Chow, “that even a negative, discriminatory fact such as racism is legitimated in the name of the living” (2002: 9). Foucault stages this pivot dramatically:

How can a power such as this kill, if it is true that its basic function is to improve life, to prolong its duration, to improve its chances, to avoid accidents, and to compensate for failings? . . . Given

that this power's objective is essentially to make live, how can it let die? How can the power of death, the function of death, be exercised in a political system centered upon biopower?

It is, I think, at this point that racism intervenes (Foucault 2003: 254).

Foucault is quick to point out that racism is not invented in this moment, but rather, that it is harnessed, incorporate *into* the biopolitical state. Indeed, "it is the emergence of this biopower that inscribes [racism] in the mechanisms of the State" (Foucault 2003: 254). For Foucault, then, racism is an incisive, sovereign function of power, one that we might say is its very force: racism "is primarily a way of introducing a break into the domain of life that is under power's control: the break between what must live and what must die" (2003: 254). Racism is a way of "fragmenting the field of the biological that power controls" into groups — "races" — precisely to accentuate control (Foucault 2003: 255). Would not Atlantic slavery, again, suggest precisely the most organised form of racialised biopower?

Foucault details further how biopower is utilised: to demonise the other so as to kill off the other, to create "mythical" inferior races so that their *enslavement* and/or extermination appears *rational* under biopower. It is here that one encounters genocide. "Racist genocide", writes Chow, "partakes of the organization, calculation, control, and surveillance characteristics of power — in other words, of all the 'civil' or 'civilized' procedures that are in place primarily to ensure the continuance of life" (2002: 9).

I would like to suggest that biopower is already at work well before the nineteenth century. Or rather, that its general form, as a raciological schema of exclusion, in which certain populations of unhumans are marked for forced labour and death, their brutal dehumanisation justified through philosophemes that exonerate and excuse the violence of enslavement, is a phenomena that resists periodisation even as it can be traced to certain, distinct passages of human history. The anachronistic terms of this

speculative hypothesis will become more clear when I turn to Derrida below. These are likewise the terms of a metaphysics of presence in which certain forms of *life* are valued above all. Life is pure presence: the living body of the (white) human that must be preserved — and this is the “logic” of biopower — “at all cost”. *Death* must be managed, “hidden away”, says Foucault (2003: 247): death is dealt out to those who labour in the colonies and plantations so as to sustain life in the centres and of empire. Death is the finitude of power, it is the end of power, Foucault reminds us (2003: 248). As today I would speculate that death is no longer strictly the end of power — biopower’s medicalisation of the body has seen to advances that are changing this sharp distinction¹⁷ — I would prefer to interpret Foucault as saying that biopower finds itself confronted with death, with the *ambiguity* of death, with its absence and its remainders, its corpses, its others, its *undecidability* that haunts the living. Moreover, this is a haunting that takes place in memory, in writing, in the constitutive absence of the other that tells me that “I am alive”. The overall *schema* in which biopower is inscribed, then, is one that values, above all, the presence of life, the value of life as presence. Because it does so, it deals in death: it must keep death at bay for some while harshly imposing it upon others; it must try to erase the ambiguity, by enforcing life or death, and by policing the boundaries as to who — or what — is dealt one or the other.

The Basement of Being (Dispossession II)

Most philosophy is hip-hopcrisy

17. This comment opens upon two conflicting perspectives; that, on the one channel, what Gilroy calls “nanopolitics” shifts the terrain of biopolitics (and thus of “race”, but also “death”) to the programming of genetic bioinformation, where “Genomics may send out the signal to ‘reify’ race as code and information, but there is a sense in which it also points unintentionally toward ‘race’s’ overcoming” (2004: 37); while, on the other channel, as Žižek reminds us, the horizon of “humanity” is the mass-death of ecological catastrophe, a mass-death: “In order to cope with this threat, our collective ideology is mobilizing mechanisms of dissimulation and self-deception which include the will to ignorance” (2011: 327). The jury is out. My point is purely speculative, to note in both instances the shifting horizons of necropolitics through nanopolitics and eschatopolitics.

In the depths of the cosmos I am totally free
— Jeru the Damaja, “Solar Flares” (2013)

I would now like to return to the question of situating “racial difference”. In the previous section, reading Foucault, it became clear that “race” is situated at the very moment in which biopower adjudicates life and death. “Race” is positioned at the absent centre, as it were, of the production of “man-as-species”. Death to the subhuman; preservation and life to the superior race. Biopower is produced by incorporating a coterminous racism, by industrialising it, rationalising it, weaponising it, wielding it as the very means to separate *us* from *them* so as to *profit* from the control of populations. I would like to descend, then, to the basement of being, by turning to the problematic of “racial” difference in a few works of Jacques Derrida.

My reasons for turning to Derrida are twofold. First, a different concept of “difference” is required, one that renders the hierarchical differences of being(s) — the “races” of “man”, but also of man-as-species to all other species in general — constitutively undecidable by mobilising the concept of *supplementarity*. Second, because Derrida has written extensively on ethnocentrism, critiquing anthropologies that belittle their “primitive” subjects as “societies without writing” (1997: 109). And third, because, as Derrida revealed in *Monolingualism of the Other Or the Prosthesis of Origin*, there are extant motivations of “lived experience” that have led him, as a Franco-Maghrebian Jew, a *pied noir* in Paris during the Algerian war of independence, to question the “hyphen” of a hyphenated existence, the silent “and” that suggests, between France and Algeria, that

the ‘and’ will never have been given, only promised or claimed. . . . The silence of that hyphen does not pacify or appease anything, not a single torment, not a single torture. It will never silence their

memory. It could even worsen the terror, the lesions, and the wounds. A hyphen is never enough to conceal protests, cries of anger or suffering, the noise of weapons, airplanes, and bombs (1998: 11).

Derrida is speaking of Algeria. But which one? The Algeria of his youth, where, as a Jew during the Second World War, he “lost” his French citizenship, “under the Occupation”, an Occupation that never took place (1998: 15–16)? Or revolutionary Algeria, where the FLN (and Fanon...), sought to break the hyphen to France — in the words of Malcolm X in 1964 — “by any means necessary”?¹⁸

What does it mean then to *identify* as Franco-Maghrebian? Derrida troubles the term, the “inhabitation” of a hyphenated “identity”. Over the course of the text, he questions whether “identity” can at all name a substantive positivity — identical-to-itself or identified as but one instance in a shared sense of being, belonging, ethnic grouping, or nationality:

To be a Franco-Maghrebian, one “like myself”, is not, not particularly, and particularly not, a surfeit or richness of identities, attributes, or names. In the first place, it would rather betray a *disorder of identity* [*trouble d’identité*] (Derrida 1998: 14).

So, in a striking passage — and one that strikes back at critics who would accuse Derrida of being unable to address the affective value and personal narrative of embodied “identity” — Derrida develops the conventional narrative of a lived experience, though an experience lived in the troubled disorder of identity, one that, for Derrida, disrupts a sense of belonging to language, dispossesses homeliness in language as in identity and nation-state, even in the ceaseless return to language, and that returns us to

18. The phrase is sampled from Sartre’s play *Dirty Hands* (*Les Mains sales*), act 5, scene 3 (1948): “I was not the one to invent lies: they were created in a society divided by class and each of us inherited lies when we were born. It is not by refusing to lie that we will abolish lies: it is by eradicating class *by any means necessary*”.

the question of (dis)possession:

I was very young at the time, and I certainly did not understand very well — already, I did not understand very well — what citizenship and loss of citizenship *meant to say*. But I do not doubt that exclusion — from the school reserved for young French citizens — could have a relationship to the disorder of identity I was speaking to you a moment ago. I do not doubt either that such “exclusions” come to leave their mark upon this belonging of non-belonging *of* language, this affiliation *to* language, this assignation to what is peacefully called a language.

But who exactly possesses it? And whom does it possess? Is language in possession, every a possessing or possessed possession? Possessed or possessing in exclusive possession, like a piece of personal property? What of this being-at-home [*être-chez-soi*] in language toward which we never cease returning? (Derrida 1998: 16–17)

What *of* this being-at-home? I suspend the question of the grounds of language, of the likewise “inhabitation” of the posthuman, to the next chapter. But the question of possession possesses us here, namely the metaphysics — those systems of thought inscribed in language and through language that classify and categorise the perception and construction of the world — that would dispossess the other of citizenship, identity, consciousness, humanity.

The general problematic we bring to Derrida, then, is that “race”, like sexual difference, but also species difference — of the human to the animal and the alien — as well as class difference — of the ordering of humans within and among “races” — has been excluded from the question of Being (and thus, the house of language). As Fanon notes above, ontology cannot account for lived experience. But everywhere there is ontology, it is through lived experience.

Rather than just contrast lived experience to ontology, however, the more incisive gesture is to

demonstrate how all that ontology suppresses so as to demarcate its realm of pure being — gender, race, class, but also, technics, writing, and the structuration of difference in general — is excluded only because it structures this exclusion, which is to say, it inhabits the realm of ontology through its constitutive contamination, to begin with.

The way this occurs can be quite complex. It is, to borrow a phrase, “site-specific”. It usually appears, within the realm of appearance, that is, of the temporalisation of phenomena, as a delayed reaction that produces the thing to begin with.

But first, to attend to “lived experience”. Ontology, then, takes place as a particular *cultural* inflection of provincialist, European, thought: the “white mythology” of an autonomous self-consciousness. What Derrida calls “white mythology” is elaborated in the Exergue to his deconstruction of metaphor in (the text of) philosophy. My strategy here as elsewhere is to emphasise the play of constitutive fantasies — often violent, of force and struggle, in domains that traverse the imaginary, socioeconomic, cultural, technical, etc. — that make up the fiction of the real. A fictional real that, of course, proclaims the facts of inhumanity and humanity.¹⁹ This could also be read, from a certain viewpoint, as Derrida’s strategy in “White Mythology — Metaphor in the Text of Philosophy”, where the differences between metaphor and mimesis, logic and rhetoric, are not so much erased as revealed as constitutive of a text that would deny such complicity. Derrida argues, circuitously, and at a length to which I cannot do justice to here, that one stage of privileging — that of logic over rhetoric, but also of a certain *type* of metaphor over another — upholds the white mythology of metaphysics, in which various thinkers, from Nietzsche to Bergson, Freud to Lenin, “in their attentiveness to metaphorical activity in theoretical discourse,

19. For such hierarchization is always a strategy, enforced by the “real fantasy” of privilege, i.e., its hegemony.

proposed or practiced the multiplication of antagonistic metaphors in order to better control or neutralize their effect” (Derrida 1984: 214).²⁰

Zizek, writing of Derrida’s critique of Eurocentric “white mythology”, remarks the affinity between Derrida and Hegel on this point: “the establishment of truth as something which is prior to and independent of ‘secondary’ rhetorical effects and figures — is *founded upon a radical rhetorical gesture*. . . the difference between *mythos/logos* is inherent to the field of myth” (Zizek 2008a: 31–32)).²¹ Or we might say in the Afrofuturist lexicon, that the difference between myth/science is inherent to the constitutively hybrid field of MythScience.

The deconstructive gesture I am concerned with here — for there is a surplus of points and asides than cannot be accounted for in Derrida’s essay, including his desire to reinscribe metaphor in a general economy — is as follows: “not . . . to reject [the metaphysical and rhetorical schema] but to reinscribe them otherwise, and especially in order to begin to identify the historico-problematic terrain on which philosophy systematically has been asked for the metaphorical rubrics of its concepts” (Derrida 1978: 215). It is a question of that “historico-problematic terrain”. That terrain of all those other (things). The historico-problematic terrain of differences, where the “historico” and its hyphen, as we saw above, signals the terrain of disordered identities. I would like to suggest, and to recapitulate Derrida’s argument, that wherever philosophy begins running into trouble with its metaphors, seeking to, metaphorically speaking, purge some metaphors from its text while surreptitiously retaining others, one

20. Can not the same be said for Derrida? It can. But to also note that Derrida’s superb mastery of language (and its phonemes and graphemes) is accelerated to the point of its chaotic loss of control; this is the pleasure (the “surplus”) of the “general economy” in which he inscribes (“philosophical”) metaphor. See (Derrida 1978).

21. Indeed, for Zizek, fantasy is the “primordial form of narrative”, which resolves “some fundamental antagonism by rearranging its terms into a temporal succession. It is thus the very form of narrative which bears witness to some repressed antagonism. The price one pays for the narrative resolution is the *petitio principii* of the temporal loop — the narrative silently presupposes as already given what it purports to reproduce” (2008b: 11–12). This loop operates by way of the “strange structure” of the supplement; hence the affinity, at this level, between Derrida and Zizek. See also (Zizek 2008a: 31–2, 211).

encounters *white mythology*, that

Metaphysics — the white mythology which reassembles and reflects the culture of the West: the white man takes his own mythology, Indo-European mythology, his own *logos*, that is, the *mythos* of his idiom, for the universal form of that he must still wish to call Reason. Which does not go uncontested (Derrida 1984: 213).

Perhaps all that is necessary is this paragraph. To which we should add another definition of metaphysics, this time from *Of Grammatology*: “metaphysics or onto-theology of the logos (par excellence in its Hegelian moment) as the powerless and oneiric effort to master absence by reducing the metaphor within the absolute parousia of sense” (1997: 106). Metaphor must be *reduced* so as to master absence, because metaphor indicates, in its slipperiness, its uncanny manifold of ungathered meaning, that “ellipsis of the originary writing within language as the irreducibility of metaphor” (1997: 106). What is this “ellipsis of the originary writing within language”? This is a phrase meaning: *différance*: originary repetition of spacing-timing nonpresence, that (in the words of Spivak) “structure of repetition, which cannot be posited as deriving from something existing as prior”, and that has been, everywhere, and everywhere differently, “suppressed or finessed” (1999: 321). The mark of the suppression of *différance* is the *trace* — that minor or marginalised presence by which we know of something of a repetitious nonpresence to begin with: the “trace of something irreducibly non-self-present” (Spivak 1999: 321). Spivak calls this suppressed nonpresence the “graphematic structure”, that “structure *like* writing” though “it is not writing commonly conceived” (Derrida calls it “*arche*-writing”), as it is the “structural *necessity*” that “operates in the absence of its origin” (1999: 321). But why suppress the graphematic structure? Why suppress (or finesse) *différance*?

There is perhaps at least one decent reason: because it disorders (and always has done so to begin with). It troubles the identity of things (and peoples). It demonstrates complicities and upsets origins. Derrida writes of it as “the specular dispossession which at the same time institutes and deconstitutes me” (1997: 141). I am done and undone by it. Even when I speak of it. Thus, it is also “a law of language. It operates as a power of death in the heart of living speech” (1997: 141). Mobilising its trace is thus evidently handy when facing master discourses. Particularly those masters that deal in death.²² And particularly those that trace their singular, and sovereign authority to a divine presence-absence — the ultimate adjudicator of death and life. Which is to say, to the white mythology, where ontotheology has the elements of force and technology on its side. The side of the superior human.

But to speak of the entire operation this way is to make *différance* a rather personable agency, to grant it intentionality, and to speak of it as a presence that can be suppressed. And so on. There is, therefore, in the translation of Derrida’s readings which I undertake here, a constitutive failure of doing precisely that. It is, granted, constitutive. Again, turning to Spivak — whom I address here as she mobilises Derrida, and *différance*, in much the way I have described above — we face a situation where words fail us, necessarily so, where the “graph’ (writing) of ‘graphematic,’ like all concept-metaphors in deconstruction, is a catachresis, a (conceptually) false metaphor, and/or a (metaphorically) compromised concept” (1999: 322). It is at this point that Spivak mobilises catachresis to outline the constitutive failure of the “human” as a self-conscious, self-present identity:

22. The relationship of *différance* to death is of no accident. “Difference began by *broaching* alienation and it ends by leaving reappropriation breached. Until death. Death is the movement of difference to the text that the movement is necessarily finite. This means that difference makes the opposition of presence and absence possible. Without the possibility of difference, the desire of presence as such would not find its breathing-space. That means by the same token that this desire carries in itself the destiny of its non-satisfaction. Difference produces what it forbids, makes possible the very thing that it makes impossible” (Derrida 1997: 143). And what if *différance* began by broaching Alien Nation? It has already: the dual meaning of the term is that of unbelonging to an alienating nation-state through which a belonging to an ex-nationalism of the alien takes place.

It is in this sense that the individual's sense of the "subject" is graphematic, catachrestic. Human beings think their own selves by thus finessing the assumption of a graphematic structure. There is no way to get ahold of a subject before the two-step [of catachresis]. . . . it is not too fanciful to say that what I have summarized here is an account for the famous de-centered (by no means dead) subject (Spivak 1999: 322).

Not quite dead. Spivak footnotes this last line. The footnote is germane to my argument here:

"Humanism names man (at best the human being) as the master of an unexamined subjective agency.

To question this conviction is not to 'kill the subject'" (Spivak 1999: 322).

Unless, of course, the subject is the master, that "false god", and one is engaged in the revolutionary violence of a slave revolt or anticolonial warfare.²³

To return to Derrida: it is absolute parousia — arrival or even officiated visit — of presence that sustains ontotheology, even as (and precisely because) the *theos* remains conspicuously absent. Here, we may substitute *theos* along a chain of signifiers: it is the "transcendental signified", the master, the fully and wholly complete human. (Is it too much to write: on a plantation, it is a false god that holds the whip?).²⁴ But the question here, again, is entwined with language, as it is entwined with consciousness, and the privileged placement of the two in taking apart the white mythology of the superior human.

23. Which is not to say it is justified. Fanon will write to justify precisely such violence in the context of Algeria. In the previous chapter, I identified an alternative — abandonment — in the heart of Césaire's Negritude to that of Fanon's "explosion" of the "vicious circle" (2008: 119). "Restructuring the world" is perhaps best — nonviolently — achieved by abandoning it. This is not to suggest such an abandonment is at all "practical". Not at least if it is but one "world". But if one abandons the "world" while remaining within it — is it not the case that there are many? If one can produce alternative worlds, offworlds, through abandonment? Here we speculate upon an Afrofuturist MythScience.

24. My invocations here of a "false god" signals a science fictional basis, drawn from the ten seasons of *Stargate: SG-1* and the Roland Emmerich directed feature film of 1994 (mentioned in the previous chapter). Throughout the galaxy, humans are enslaved under the Go'auld, a parasitic snake-race that possesses human hosts, pretending to be false gods, often in the model (and as the basis of) the Egyptian Pharaohs. Their spaceships are pyramids, etc. Overthrowing the "false gods" is the main narrative of the first eight seasons, as well as the personal struggle of Teal'c, former First Prime (Jaffa warrior) to the false god Apophis. The parallels that *Stargate* makes to anticolonial liberation struggles, as well as struggles against religions wielded as the means of subordination and military strategy, are plentiful, welcome, and Afrofuturist.

Improper Names: Writing Ethnocentrism

I would now like to pivot again to *Of Grammatology*. It is also here we can directly address ethnocentrism, writing, and consciousness. The “rational subject” — which is, of course, a myth, though a white mythology everywhere enforced where the “human” is the institutionalised antinomy and thus master to the dehumanised slave — excludes all those others lacking in this or that, notably those who lack the presence of *writing* as the visible evidence of consciousness.²⁵

The effects of such an imperial self-consciousness are many, but chief among many is its ethnocentrism. Derrida ties the metaphysics of imperial self-consciousness to ethnocentrism in a critique of anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, the latter who diagnoses his subjects, that “little band of nomads, who are among the most genuinely ‘primitive’ of the world’s peoples”, the Nambikwara, as a “society without writing” (Lévi-Strauss, in Derrida 1997: 107, 109). Derrida’s critique of ethnocentrism is precise: *whose* concept of “writing”? Moreover the expression is logically unsustainable: there can be no “society” *without* differentiation, no *socius* without the orderings (of “tribal” organisation, family, affiliation, class, etc.) performed upon the trace of the graphematic structure. “This expression [society without writing] is dependent on ethnocentric oneirism”, writes Derrida, “upon the vulgar, that is to say ethnocentric, misconception of writing” (1997: 109). *Why* is this? “If writing is no longer understood in the narrow sense of linear and phonetic notation, it should be possible to say that all societies capable of producing, that is to say, obliterating, their proper names, and of bringing classificatory difference into

25. It is this tautological “auto-affection” that excludes the other in determining the integrity of the self and its self-presence (to-itself) that Derrida argues is at the core of Western metaphysics and that, throughout his work, he has sought to deconstruct. Below I will turn to *Speech and Phenomena* (1973).

play, practice writing in general” (1997: 109).

There are three points that I wish to extrapolate at this time:

i) The first is that self-consciousness, in the ethnocentric schema of Lévi-Strauss’ Eurocentric anthropology, is linked to visibly graphic writing as its authentic mark of presence. A people is not “self-conscious” — not fully human, but held within the quotation marks as “primitives” — without visible writing. Derrida demonstrates this point in a critique of Lévi-Strauss’ narrow assessment of the Nambikwara’s prohibition on speaking proper names. Derrida shows how the *presence* of the proper name is no guarantor of the *presence* of writing-as-consciousness just as the *nonpresence* of the proper name does not signify its lack. Rather, Derrida points out that “nonprohibition, as much as prohibition” arrives at the same “obliteration” of the proper name, for the moment of the latter’s naming — in consciousness, writing, or speech: the structure remains the same — does not signify its presence but, precisely because of the (graphematic) structure of writing, its absence:

Nonprohibition, the *consciousness* or exhibition of the proper name, only makes up for or uncovers an essential and irremediable impropriety. When within *consciousness*, the name is called *proper*, it is already classified and is obliterated in *being named*. It is already no more than a *so-called* proper name (Derrida 1997: 109).

ii) Second point: what does Derrida mean by “consciousness”? This general question is too vast to address here. It is, moreover, textually specific. This specificity addresses the ethnocentrism that Derrida would assign to a “general” elaboration of consciousness. But consciousness “in-itself”, as one can hazard at this point, is not the parousia of a substantive presence, but the *effect* of the graphematic structure, insofar as its *self-consciousness* circulates through the other:

Conversation is, then, a communication between two absolute origins that, if one may venture the formula, auto-affect reciprocally, repeating as immediate echo the auto-affection produced by the other. Immediacy is here the myth of consciousness. Speech and the consciousness of speech — that is to say consciousness simply as self-presence — are the phenomenon of an auto-affection lived as suppression of difference. That *phenomenon*, that presumed suppression of difference, that lived reduction of the opacity of the signifier, are the origin of what is called presence. That which is not subjected to the process of difference is *present*. The present is that from which we believe we are able to think time, effacing the inverse necessity: to think the present from time as difference (Derrida 1997: 166).

In *Of Grammatology*, the “metaphysics of presence as self-proximity” grants a “privileged position to the absolute now” (1997: 309). This absolute now is the position of presence from which the myth of self-contained “auto-affection” is thought: the privilege of self-consciousness, that consciousness conscious of itself without the necessity of the other. This concept of consciousness is not universal, but provincial to white mythology. The inverse also implies, for the relationship is constitutive: the white mythology of self-contained self-consciousness produces the thinking of time in the present and of phenomena as presence.

The structure of this white mythology, again, is inscribed within ethnocentrism. Ethnocentrism and its discourse of *raciology* are not added-on after the fact. The “classification” of “race” is not secondary to the thinking of *différance*. Nor is it before or after that of sexual difference. Race and sexual difference are not “one and the same”, but they both are displaced at the origin. They are both produced as supplementarity differences from the presence of signs inscribed upon bodies, and when displaced from biological essentialism to the realms of culture, ethnicity, and gender, as supplementary once again. Thus

sexual/racial difference is inscribed in a chain that Derrida traces throughout his work: ethnocentrism—phallogocentrism.

Ethnocentrism takes place, as we saw above with Lévi-Strauss, at the heart of a white mythology that privileges certain forms of presence — visible writing, nonprohibited names — as the markers of non-primitives, in short, of self-conscious, civilised humans (all the latter descriptors here placed within invisible quotation marks). The privilege of static and unchanging Being, of the “absolute now”, is necessary to put other (non)beings in their place, ordered and categorised by the violence of a white mythology — metaphysics — that treats differentiation from the myth of presence as denigrated simulacra or lesser substitution: the raciologies of the subaltern, the subhuman, the inhuman or inhuman, the woman, the transhuman, the disabled, the animal, the organic, the machine. This list is not an ordering or hierarchy. Nor is it exhaustive.

iii) My third, and last extrapolated point, is to turn to the structure of *supplementarity*. “Race”, as a concept, is often analysed as supplement: it is considered as an after-thought. It comes after primary differences. It is a derivative effect of the Enlightenment, unfortunate, but supplementary, and not constitutive. My turn to Derrida began with the question of where and how to position the “difference” of “race”. It should be clear where such a difference has been placed all along: at the origin (of metaphysics).

The supplement serves a two-fold analytic function. First, the supplement is that which, under metaphysics, is the superfluous, additional, or simulacra to the parousia of being. All that is excluded from presence to make presence present, all that is excluded from self-consciousness to keep it purely self-contained, all that is “suppressed or finessed” is *supplemental*. It is waste, though it can be put to

good use, of course. Indigenous peoples are supplemental to the civilisation of white mythology, providing the maps, territories, and knowledges that civilisation later renames as its own, as are the racialised infrahumans that prepare the land for the master; as unnecessary but essential waste, they are erased from history, driven from the land — enslaved, imprisoned, confined to reservations, sent to re-education camps, colonised. The supplement, however, wherever there is that which is identified as supplement (and all the marks of such identification: tattoos, stars, numbers, skins, noses, glasses), reveals the violent operation of suppression (in this case, rarely “finesse”) of all that differs and defers (*différance*). The supplement is everywhere suppressed where there is the white mythology of origin, presence, self-consciousness:

The concept of origin or nature is nothing but the myth of addition, of supplementarity annulled by being purely additive. It is the myth of the effacement of the trace, that is to say of an originary difference that is neither absence nor presence, neither negative nor positive. Originary difference is supplementarity as *structure*. Here structure means the irreducible complexity within which one can only shape or shift the play of presence or absence: that within which metaphysics can be produced but which metaphysics cannot think (Derrida 1997: 167).

Everywhere, however — and as Derrida sought at first to explicate, and then to let loose, in *play*, upon the canonical texts of philosophy — are the destabilising effects of the suppressed “supplement”, the paradoxical shapeshifting of *différance* where it manifests as that which is excluded from the origin so as to constitute it after-the-fact. Always in various guises, precisely because it is non-essence, *différance* arrives afterwards to structure the thing beforehand, a “strange” operation that Derrida describes “a primordial ‘supplement’: their *addition* comes to *make up* for a deficiency, it comes to compensate for a primordial nonself-presence” (1973: 87). Its temporality is strictly non-linear and contradictory when

thought under metaphysics, entirely *strange*, which is to say, uncanny or unearthly, thus: “that strange structure of the supplement appears here: by delayed reaction, a possibility produces that to which it is said to be added on” (1973: 89). Or, one could say it comes from the outside to seal itself in from the inside; it is that “strange essence of the supplement not to have essentiality: it may always not have taken place” (1986a: 314).

Let us now grapple our way out of the basement of Western metaphysics.

Denise Ferreira da Silva, in her conclusion to *Toward A Global Idea of Race*, reflects upon tracing the trajectory of “self-consciousness” in Western thought, writing of “the [rationalist, self-conscious] figure who, by the end of the seventeenth century, had sent astrologers, magicians, witch doctors, and those engaged in the deciphering of the signs of the world into exile in the province of superstition” (2007: 255). Of course, entire “races” were exiled, as occult, pagan, superstitious, irrational and above all, inhuman. Expanding upon Derrida’s argument above, da Silva writes that self-consciousness, “that self-determined thing, [is] the only one able alone to decide on its essence and existence” (255). It alone is self-determining by its “profound intimacy with a regulative or productive logos” (2007: 255). By dissecting the “productive weapons of reason, the tools of science and history” and how they “institute both [rational, Euro- and phallogocentric] man and his others as global-historical beings”, da Silva connects the ontological discourse of “consciousness” to that of “race” (2007: xix). The production of the rational, self-conscious subject “man”, da Silva argues, *requires the production of “race”*. This is the point marked above, though here elevated in scale: ethnocentrism, the centring of “race”, is (at) the origin of white mythology, which is to say, the metaphysical production of what Sun Ra calls the “hue-man”.

You Are a Population: Abandoning the Proper Name

Malcolm always assumed an approachable and intimate outward style, yet also held something in reserve. These layers of personality were even expressed as a series of different names, some of which he created, while others were bestowed upon him: Malcolm Little, Homeboy, Jack Carlton, Detroit Red, Big Red, Satan, Malachi Shabazz, Malik Shabazz, El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz. No single personality ever captured him fully. In this sense, his narrative is a brilliant series of reinventions, “Malcolm X” being just the best known (Marable 2011: 10).

I still marvel at how swiftly my previous life’s thinking pattern slid away from me, like snow off a roof. It as though someone else I knew of had lived by hustling and crime. I would be startled to catch myself thinking in a remote way of my earlier self as another person.

— Malcolm X (1999: 173)

What does it mean to “reinvent”? And when the invention to be reinvented is the self, or rather, the artifice of consciousness that has been constructed as-such? *Reinvention*: the self is “reinvented”, a process that encapsulates the subtitle of Manning Marable’s biography of Malcolm X, “A Life of Reinvention” (2011). Yet this reinvention is not just of a shift in personality, or even of a therapeutic nature: the mark of transformative reinvention takes place through a reinvention of what that inexpressible “I” “is” and “can be”, a reinvention that abruptly confronts a world that differentiates *who can* from *what cannot*.

Reinvention must grapple with two levels: consciousness and the world. “Another solution is possible”, writes Fanon: “it implies restructuring the world” (2008: 63). But what is signified by “world”? What is the relationship of “world” to “consciousness”? And what does it mean to “restructure” either?

In this section, I turn to the production of “reinvention” as the means to grapple with this questioning at the level of praxis.

What “reinvention” is up against in this moment takes the shape of vast forces: history, the State, “race”, consciousness: biopolitics, white mythology, metaphysics: these name forces that would, it appears, be extraordinarily difficult to confront, precisely because they organise the logic or schema of confrontation, the confrontation between *us* and *them*.

Malcolm X is a pivotal figure in this discussion because he reinvents, but also *renames*, himself.²⁶

The reinvention is complex, but named. *Malcolm Little*, an impoverished African-American youth, swing dancer, dope dealer, hustler and petty criminal, becomes *Malcolm X*, black separatist, powerful orator, and militant leader — next to Elijah Muhammad — of the Nation of Islam.

With the shapeshifting qualities of Malcolm X one witnesses the role of the *proper name* as a technique of reinvention. The proper name is a pliable text, treated with suspicion, for the proper name

26. Throughout his life X perpetually stages the question of “what can (I) be” in relation to various (incredibly determined and overwhelming) disciplinary, theistic, racialised, economic, and juridical structures. In short, Malcolm’s life is one that traces the contours of power. As a youth, he lived the lives of a zoot suit swing dancer, Harlem street hustler, dope dealer to the jazzers, numbers runner, and petty burglar before his imprisonment at age 20 in 1945; it is in prison that he is converted to the strict religious observances of the Nation of Islam, and in short time he becomes a prolific, and powerful, orator, organiser, and proselytiser, gaining international recognition for his outspoken advocacy for black nationalism and criticism of white racism; and then yet again, facing unsettling questions concerning the personal integrity of the Nation of Islam’s “Messenger of Allah”, Elijah Muhammad, Malcolm X reinvents himself — again — cutting ties with the Nation in 1964. In his last year, Malcolm X undertook the Hajj to Mecca; he found himself feted across the African region as a pan-Africanist leader. Upon his return to the United States, he attempted to forge a third-position for black political organisation inclusive of white efforts to end structural racism, though he increasingly found himself and his ideas wedged between the Civil Rights movement and the Nation. Before his assassination in 1965, X had assumed yet another name that had lain dormant: El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz. Despite his public persona, and the many representations of his life, I approach the factual detail of X’s life guardedly, keeping in mind the critical approach Marable takes toward *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (1999). Marable points out in his *Malcolm X: A Life of Reinvention* (2011) that the *Autobiography* is rife with exclusions and select re-tellings, in short, a chronopolitics applied both by Malcolm X to his historical self-representation, as well as the “liberal Republican” agenda of his biographer, Alex Haley. Manning writes that “Haley’s purpose was quite different” to Malcolm’s use of his autobiography “to explain his break from black separatism” (2011: 9). For Haley, argues Marable, “the autobiography was a cautionary tale about human waste and the tragedies produced by racial segregation” (Marable 2011: 9). Nonetheless, the transformative capacity of Malcolm X is not diminished through Marable’s account; on the contrary, the shifts in self-reinvention are, if anything, even more radical than that narrated in the *Autobiography*. This is because in the latter, Malcolm, with the benefit of hindsight and creative memory, and through a narrative recounted in the service of his public efforts to explicate his break with the Nation of Islam, tries to turn his life into a calling, an individuated, dialectical progression from youth to criminal, prisoner to Islamist — a theist teleology that X implies is preordained by Allah. See (Marable 2011; X 1999).

denotes the patronym of the slave owner. Members of the Nation adopt the surname of “X” as a mark of erasure, but also to signify the historical void that is the “slave name”, the absence of anthroponymy. Senior members adopt the last name of “Shabazz”, the “original tribal identity of the lost-found”, the “original black man” (Marable 2011: 135).

The “original” name is abandoned. There is an exodus from the proper name in its reinvention. John Szwed, the biographer of Sun Ra, argues that there is a “tradition” of doing so, that

on the one hand draws from African precedents for giving sets of multiple names at birth, and on the other is part of a process of earning, inventing, or discovering new names throughout life. . . . an extra layer of complexity was added when enslaved African Americans took or were given the names of their former owners (Szwed 1998: 80).

Booker T. Washington begins *Up From Slavery* without a name, nor knowing of “the exact place or exact date” of his birth (1995: 1). Nor does he know of his father’s: “not very much attention was given to family history and family records”, he writes, “that is, black family records” (1995: 1). With the Emancipation Proclamation, and the “coming of freedom”, Washington observes how “all the people on our place” agreed to “change their names” (1995: 11). “A great many of them took other surnames”, writes Washington: “this was one of their first signs of freedom” (1995: 11).

Sun Ra changed his name. Born Herman S. Blount, he became “Le Sony’r Ra” on October 20th, 1952. Herman S. Blount became a “pseudonym”, along with “le Sun Ra”, used to ascertain copyright (Szwed 1998: 83, 87). Then there are the heteronyms of Afrofuturist Detroit techno producers, the multiple names that signify the replicant qualities of machinic rhythm music. Juan Atkins, one half of early ‘80s electro hip-hop outfit Cybotron, “multiplies himself into machinic names”, writes Kodwo

Eshun: Model 500, M500, X-Ray, Channel One Frequency, Audiotech and Infiniti (1999: 07[106]).²⁷

Becoming many-named

announces the producer as the next model, the synthesizer of the future. . . . To cyborg yourself you name yourself after a piece of technical equipment, become an energy generator, a channel, a medium for transmitting emotions electric. . . . The producer disappears into each alterego but the machinate name is not a pseudonym, a fake name. Rather it's a *heteronym*, a many-name, one in a series of parallel names which distributes and disperses you into the public secrecy of open anonymity. I is a crowd: the producer exists simultaneously, every alterego an advertisement for myselfs (Eshun 1999: 07[106]).²⁸

I turn to the proper name in this section to emphasise two movements. The first is that of an abandonment, or exodus, from the *given* proper name. The second is to trace how this exodus from *given conditions* has given rise to other abandonments: militant segregation from white society, exodus from the nation-state of America.

I seek to show that segregation and migration are not the only, nor necessary, outcomes of reinventing oneself by abandoning the proper name and reinventing another. The Afrofuturist abandonment of the human is signalled in Eshun's description of machinic heteronymy above. The unhuman heteronym draws the producer into the future, precisely because it signals other forms of becoming: machinic, alien, androidal. But this exodus from the givens of the proper name also takes

27. There are multiple examples; the practice is widespread among techno and electronic musicians in general. Other Detroit Afrofuturists include Underground Resistance as X-102, World 2 World, Galaxy 2 Galaxy, The Martian. Afrofuturist hip-hop emcee Kool Keith as Funk Igniter Plus, Rhythm X, Dr Octagon, Black Elvis. 4 Hero as Tek 9, Internal Affairs, Tom & Jerry, Nu Era. The RZA from Wu-Tang Clan as Bobby Digital. Aphex Twin as Analord and Polygon Window. Uwe Schmidt as Atom", Atom Heart, Señor Coconut, Lassigue Bendthaus, Lisa Carbon, Atomu Shinzo, Datacide, +N, Jet Chamber, Haruomi Hosono, Gon, Flanger.

28. Eshun's connection here of the "I" to commodification is explicit: the heteronymy of the "I" is produced as coterminous to the proliferation of global commodities, informatics, and tele-technologies: the "I", *qua* consciousness, is an *effect* of these tele-technological circuit. This effect is not just of a disembodied "I", suggests Derrida, in conversation with Bernard Stiegler, but "is really a transformation of the body. This relation to technics is not something to which a given body must yield, adjust, etc. It is more than anything something which transforms the body. It is not the same body that moves and reacts in front of all these devices. Another body gradually invents itself, modifies itself, conducts its own subtle mutation" (2002: 96).

place at the level of “consciousness”. There can be no exodus from the racialised category of the human without an abandonment of white mythology and its raciology of self-contained consciousness. There is, then, but not a single “consciousness”. As I briefly discussed in the last chapter, for Du Bois, there is already *double consciousness*, the inward/outward split between Fanon’s “black skin, white masks”. Double-consciousness, however, signals two problematics: that between acting/doing for two different racialised contexts, between thinking one thing and saying another, “born with a Veil”, writes Du Bois, “and gifted with second sight” (1994: 2); and that of encountering the artificial construct of “consciousness” as incorporated inferiority: consciousness as a destructive implant whitewashed from the beginning, a white mask lurking underneath the appearance of black skin, thanks to colonial pedagogy (Fanon 2008: 126–28).

How many, then? How many names? How many consciousnesses? In the excerpt above, Eshun states that “I is a crowd”:²⁹ his text describes the heteronymic “consciousness” of the Afrofuturist abandonment of the human, wherein multiple other/selves “designate your parallel states” (Eshun 1999: 07[106]). Eshun describes the process of undertaking the radical reinvention of heteronymy through the MythScience of ‘90s hip-hop emcee Dr Octagon, an alien gynecologist from Jupiter. Dr Octagon has become alien to all: “it’s the Earth and it’s Earth people — you! — who are the aliens”, reminds Eshun (1999: 03[036]). Listening to Dr Octagon, one *hears* the spaced-out multiplicity of Alien Nation, for the Dr has multiple voices, multiple inflections of the “I”, an I/eye that participates in octagonal viewpoints, just as Kool Keith, the pseudonym behind the heteronym of Dr Octagon, and member of late ‘80s hip-hop crew The Ultramagnetic MC’s, becomes entirely different voices with different

29. Which Eshun samples from Walt Whitman, whose enunciation suggests a “queering” of the “I” (see also Ahmed 2006). As I suggested in chapter three, the multiple-voicings of the “I” are coterminous to polymorphous, unhuman, (gender)bending, and queer sexualities.

embodiments and agendas: Black Elvis, Funk Igniter Plus, Rhythm X. Thus, one encounters the condition of what Eshun calls “I Multiplied”:

The traditional diagnosis of alienation no longer makes any sense to the 90s producer. Instead of synchronizing the mediated body with self image until the 2 make a single knowledge of self, Dr Octagon disaligns the selves and then continues to multiply them in a mitosis of the I. . . . To listen to Dr Octagon today is to grasp that every I is a crowd, that you are a population, that unity is a fleeting, accidental convergence persistently mistaken for an identity (Eshun 1999: 03[038]).

There is a strange logic at work in the Afrofuturist multiplication of the I. It is encapsulated in Eshun’s subtitle: “You Are a Population”. Control over populations is the end goal of biopolitics. Reinventing oneself into a population, then, disperses the singular statistic of the self into a multiplicity of marks. With multiple Is, and shifting heteronyms, *myself* becomes more difficult to pin down, track down, control. Internalising the population reflects an attempt, perhaps, to control biopolitics from “within”.

Just as the exodus from the proper name does not necessarily lead to militant exodus from white society — the black nationalist segregation of the Nation of Islam — the Afrofuturist abandonment of the human doesn’t necessarily entail the fragmented dispersion of the “I”. But both movements, both abandonments of the I-consciousness, begin with an *exodus*.

Black Star Lines: Exodus to/from the Pharaohs

What does it mean to abandon the construct of the human, to abandon the white mythology of consciousness? I would like to think this question at the level of *exodus*: of an organised retreat, or

strategic withdrawal, from systems of oppression, territories of containment, or white mythologies of inferiority. The concept of exodus as “engaged withdrawal” has been explicated by Paolo Virno, a theorist connected with Italian Autonomia: for Virno, exodus takes place in the “founding leave-taking” of a “new Republic” (1996: 197).³⁰ Exodus withdraws from unequal and pathological conditions of “politics” — which are clearly here the case under colonialism, slavery, institutionalised discrimination, white hegemony — so as to re-stage the political. Here, the political is thought as the conditions of articulating a politic. The political is the ungrounded ground upon which a Republic is founded. Exodus can be thought as a flight from hegemonic politics so as to reconstitute its framework anew. Exodus is thus a withdrawal *toward* a “restructuring of the world”, in Fanon’s terms, and not just *from* the world: it actively seeks, in its flight, to explore new modes of belonging in an elsewhere/elsewhen. It seeks to restructure the “world” as-such, and not just shift its existing terms.³¹

There have been many movements of exodus in Afrodiasporic history. Here I wish to draw a connection between Marcus Garvey and Malcolm X. Malcolm Little grew up the son of a minister for Garvey’s Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), his mother the secretary of the local chapter. The UNIA supported black separatism, organising black economic, cultural, religious, and educational institutions. It also raised funds to send African-Americans “back” to the African continent in an organised exodus (see Marable 2011). I mention Little’s familial adherence to the principles of the UNIA insofar as it allegorizes how the Nation of Islam adopted, but also modified, the UNIA’s platform of exodus by agitating for an autonomous, segregated “Negro state” within the United States.

30. Autonomia is an Italian, “cultural, post-Marxist, left-wing political movement” that operated from the 1970s through the ‘80s, opposed “work ethics and hierarchy as much as exclusive ideological rigidity”, inventing “their own forms of social ‘war-fair’ — pranks, squats, collective reappropriations (pilfering), self-reductions (rent, electricity, etc.), pirate radios, sign tinkering” (Lotringer 2007: v). Theorists associated with Autonomia include Franco “Bifo” Berardi (2009a; Berardi 2009b), Félix Guattari (1984; 1995), Christian Marazzi (2008; 2010), Toni Negri (2005; 2008) and others collected in Marazzi and Lotringer’s *Autonomia: Post-Political Politics* (2007).

31. I have explored these relationships in regards to autonomous zones of rave culture in (van Veen 2010).

Later in life, Malcolm X would field questions that asked where such a new black republic might be located, often citing the Biblical parable of Exodus to embellish the need for territorial segregation, economic independence and black self-government (Cowan 1961). In 1961, at a speech at Harvard University, Malcolm identifies black nationalism with the Jewish flight from Egypt: “In the Bible God offered the Pharaoh freedom if he would just let the oppressed people free to go to the land of milk and honey. But the Pharaoh disobeyed, and he was destroyed” (in Cowan 1961). I will return to this identification below,³² contrasting it to Sun Ra, who seeks not to flee the Pharaoh, but *become* a Pharaoh — though an alien-ated one whose multiplicity is provocatively open to all.

The exodus organised by the UNIA can be interpreted through an Afrofuturist lens. Kodwo Eshun writes that “Jamaican activist Marcus Garvey, ‘the Black Moses,’ named his shipping fleet Black Star Liners, to plug the notions of repatriation, of return to the patria, the fatherland, into that of interplanetary escape” (1999: 09[156]). In Afrofuturist exodus, the new republic takes the shape of a new planet. Restructuring the world means undertaking an off-worlding. Reflecting upon Eshun, Sha LaBare has argued for the particularly Afrofuturist inflection of Garvey’s conceptualisation of exodus, insofar as the return to Africa was “a journey conceived less as a return to the past than as a leap into the future”, the “dark continent” not unlike the outer blackness of space:

Much like “outer space”, Garvey’s Africa was a paraspace, a heterotopia in which the racist logics of U.S. America were to be reversed and transformed. Rooted in mythic pasts and full of mythic futures, this Africa offered an escape from Slavery America, an open, unexplored land waiting to

32. Fanon points out how the difference between anti-Semitism and racism is one of passing: “I am a slave not to the ‘idea’ others have of me, but to my appearance” (2008: 95). But such distinctions are revealed as superficial: “‘When you hear someone insulting the Jews, pay attention; he is talking about you.’ . . . the anti-Semite is inevitably a negrophobe” (2008: 101). Thus, for Fanon, “all forms of exploitation are alike. They all seek to justify their existence by citing some biblical decree. All forms of exploitation are identical, since they apply to the same object: ‘man’” (2008: 69). The Biblical decree is, in satirical fashion, wielded by Malcolm X against majoritarian Christianity, black and white, and particularly against the integrationist aims and Civil Rights efforts of the Southern Baptist Convention and Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC).

fulfill the manifest destiny of the modern black man (LaBare 2010: 25).

The Old Testament book of Exodus, and its narrative of exile, suffering, and redemption, offers a blueprint for undertaking flight to the Promised Land. Biblical Exodus, as a narrative that reflects upon exile that is forced yet preordained, operates as a means to sociopolitically, and psychologically situate, but also transcendentalise through a theist discourse and belief system — thus offering a teleological promise of betterness, a fleeting sense of preordained hope — both past and contemporary experiences of enslavement, discrimination, and inequality.

At the same time, however, Afrofuturist *and* Afrocentric trajectories have embraced the antithetical position contained within Exodus, identifying not with the exiled and their forced migration to the Promised Land, but with the authority, mythology, sociopolitical order and land of the exiler, the Pharaoh: such is the position of Sun Ra, who Kodwo Eshun, with a penchant for overemphasis, describes as thoroughly despotic:

Sun Ra looks down on humans with the inhuman indifference and impatience of a Plutonian Pharaoh. As the composer despot, he breaks not only with gospel tradition but also with Trad future-slave narratives: *Planet of the Apes*, *Brother From Another Planet*, *Blade Runner*, *Alien Nation*. Rather than identify with the replicants, with Taylor from *Planet of the Apes*, Ra is more likely to dispatch bladeunners after the Israelites. . . . (Eshun 1999: 09[155]).

As I explore in the next chapter, Ra transforms the figure of the Pharaoh through alien becoming, just as he transforms and recapitulates the African American musical tradition rather than breaking with it.³³ This transformed Pharaoh is likewise not singular in its sovereign deification: Ra suggests a

33. Contrary to Eshun's polemic, Ra represents far less a "break" from African American soul than Eshun suggests. Ra's music does not dispell the jazz traditions; in his phonebook sized playbook, Ra transcribed (from vinyl records) and rewrote the jazz standards of his Chicago mentors, in particular the big band compositions of "the father of swing", Fletcher Henderson (1897–1952), whose works

becoming-alien that transforms the NOI's doctrine that "the black man is god", anticipating the later development, by the Five Percent, that every (black) man is god. Thus Sun Ra is not the sole sovereign, the singular deity, but an invitation to all — an inclusivity that expands with Ra's long life, and that can be read to include all "multi-hued" and multi-gendered becomings — to become sovereign alien multiplicities. Ra — among other Afrofuturists such as George Clinton and Parliament, the funk and disco outfit Earth, Wind, and Fire, Afro-cyborg Cindi Mayweather a.k.a. Janelle Monáe, and hip-hop "Garbage God" Rammellzee — reinvent the Pharaoh, sampling the pyramidal architectures and Kemetian mythologies of Afrocentrism in a futuristic positioning on the *other side* of Exodus. While they share the gesture of Pharaohophilia with the Kemetian originism of Afrocentrism, the Afrofuturist transformation of Afrocentric Pharaohic mythology transforms the latter's raciology through science fictional means. By repurposing Kemetian mythology in an Afro-futurology, exodus as a strategic withdrawal, erstwhile equated with black nationalism and racialised segregation, is likewise transformed. Afrofuturist exodus suggests an alternative to the pragmatic, but ultimately racio-segregationist approaches of the UNIA and NOI. Rather than fleeing the territories of oppression, Afrofuturist exodus, as an abandonment of the human and exodus from the white mythology of consciousness, seeks to reinvent the mapping of the territory, to restructure the "world" by off-worlding it, to reinvent a posthumanity by proffering alter-becomings.

My gesture in this section, however, is to reflect the persistence of exodus, of abandonment, in the general movements of the Afrodiaspora as well as Afrocentric and Afrofuturist MythSciences. The

remained standards among even the most avant-garde incarnations of the Arkestra. *New York Times* critic John Wilson describes an Arkestra appearance at Slug's, the East Village jazz tavern, in 1968: "A Sun Ra composition that offers twittering bird calls rubbed from a pair of Chinese tiddies, a vast percussive orchestral hullabaloo of grunts and squawks and a hot solo on a ram's horn will dissolve into Fletcher Henderson's arrangement of 'King Porter's Stomp' (in Szwed 1998: 226). So though Ra is the Pharaoh to Exodus, this identification with the apparent despot suggests a more complex inheritance of tradition in general, of historical precedent in both music and culture, that transforms the figure of the Pharaoh itself.

Afrofuturist trajectory restructures the world by abandoning it *as world* — as world as point of Earthly origin. The Afrofuturist trajectory abandons the given cartography of the world — its hegemonic myth that it is the only “world” — in order to reimagine it otherwise: to remap a new set of coordinates upon its surface. It is this reimagining, this reinvention, that constitutes the futurology of Exodus in an elsewhen/elsewhere. With this thought in mind, I wish to pivot again — this time to Shaolin, a.k.a. Staten Island, home of The Abbot of the Wu-Tang Clan, the RZA, and his alter-ego, Bobby Digital.

The RZA-rection of Consciousness

The stakes of exodus take on new meanings when considering the realpolitik of escaping the confines of systemic socioeconomic impoverishment and its policed territories, a.k.a., the “ghetto”. Such lines of flight require, as the RZA suggests, an estrangement from the basic codes and conventions of the street, an alien-ation from the surrounds through a reimagining of the territory and the self within it: Wu-Tang Clan transforms Staten Island to Shaolin. At stake here is also a reinvention of *space*: of leveraging the distance between the map and the ghettoized territory by re-visualising it, re-naming it, signifyin’ it otherwise through alternate “knowledges of self”.³⁴

The RZA is producer and Abbot of the Wu-Tang Clan, an influential, multi-faceted hip-hop crew that has defined an esoteric if not surreal trajectory to “gangsta rap” since their debut LP, *Enter the Wu-Tang (36 Chambers)* (1993).³⁵ Along with most of the other Wu-Tang members — Method Man,

34. There is a psychogeographical strategy at work in Wu Tang’s transformation of Staten Island to Shaolin. It also bears resemblance to the strategy of the Temporary Autonomous Zone (TAZ) outlined by Hakim Bey, “a guerrilla operation which liberates an area (of land, of time, of imagination) and then dissolves itself to re-form elsewhere/elsewhen” (1991). However unlike Bey’s anarchotopia, Wu-Tang is thoroughly enmeshed with mediation, mediatisation, and commodification as constitutive of its dissemination of counter-reality signs — which makes it all the more interesting compared to Bey’s desire for “disappearance”. Wu-Tang’s psychotopology of Shaolin is closer to the idea of “*always occupying an autonomous zone*” (Bey 1991: 124), in which its perpetual re-occupation is undertaken through the disseminated Wu-MythSciences of hip-hop music (for the TAZ, says Bey, “Music Is An Organizational Principle”).

Inspectah Deck, Raekwon, Ghostface Killah, U-God — RZA came up in the projects of Staten Island, New York (GZA, Masta Killa, and Ol' Dirty Bastard, from Brooklyn). The narrative I wish to recapitulate here is something of an Afrofuturist *Bildungsroman* of the RZA, drawn from his two exemplary texts, *The Tao of Wu* (2009) and *The Wu-Tang Manual* (2005). Though both texts evidently serve as marketing tools for the Clan's music and other commercial projects, including clothing lines and various franchises — the two texts are self-mythologisations inseparable from what Gilroy describes as the “insatiable machinery of commodification” in which hip-hop is self-reflexively implicated (2004: 179) — I wish to emphasise the pedagogical, as well as esoteric gravitas of these texts: they have been designed as flight manuals for the entrapped and ghetto-confined. In an era of “reality television” and other such confessional cultures that valorise and capitalise upon tell-all autobiographical narratives that double as self-serving advertisements, RZA has undertaken a more challenging assessment of his methods and legacy, delving into questions of spirituality and blackness, into the parameters of what it means to live a good life, and the strategies he and the Clan have undertaken to escape the circumstances of systemic discrimination that everywhere confines racialised peoples.

Jeff Chang describes how when Wu-Tang came onto the scene in the 1990s, the music industry was engulfed in predatory capitalism, in which “Local hip-hop undergrounds suddenly appeared to be veins of gold waiting to be exploited” and where “[independent labels] were bought up, squeezed out or rolled right over” (2005: 443). This exploitation narrative, however, ignores the capitalist agency

35. Influential because the Wu-Tang Clan was produced and created solely by its members — all of whom were lower-class, ghettoized black youth — without studio involvement or record-label marketing. Influential because *36 Chambers* consists of a dense weaving of knowledges interacting at levels that range far beyond that of representational lyricism. While Five Percenter knowledge, chess, and kung-fu mix in the emcee flow, other knowledges are embedded within the LP's production: *36 Chambers* was made for \$36,000. The 36th chamber is the highest level of the Shaolin warrior monk, and signifies his undefeatability. In the film *Shaolin and Wu Tang* (1983), the Wu-Tang achieve the 36th level only to be cast out by the Shaolin. Of note, there are 36 squares on a chessboard. In Divine Mathematics, $3+6=9$, which is Born. You add 1 (Knowledge) and return to 10, $1+0$, which is the Knowledge and the Cipher, the recursive loop of the zero, the circle. “Because what happens when you get to that ten? You're actually on the left side of that zero. You, one, are on the left side of that zero. Cipher is a zero. A circle” (RZA 2009: 45).

enacted by RZA (among others, like Death Row Records) who founded “hip-hop empires” by consolidating and controlling talent through business practices that refused to bow to the interests, control, or direction of major labels and their conglomerates.³⁶ In a chapter entitled “Capitalism”, RZA details the “Five Year Plan” in which he assumed authoritarian control over Wu-Tang (like Sun Ra over the Arkestra), determining all contractual relations of its emcees (controversially assigning members to different labels), *as well as* studio producing and mastering every single Wu-Tang release, with final cut over appearances and content (2005: 71–84). RZA’s autocratic style resonates with the self-made myth of corporate deacons like Steve Jobs. Like Apple, RZA’s ruthless branding and marketing strategy was a success: “today”, writes RZA, “Wu-Tang Corp, as we call it, is linked to at least thirty companies” including apparel, merchandising, comic books, and of course, music, from production to distribution. For RZA, “integrity” coexists with commodification: this was the *intent to begin with*: “A few years ago I used to say we’re going to take this from digital to Disney. . . . but I’m not going to jump at every opportunity. It’s got to be within the integrity of the brand” (2005: 82).³⁷ Insofar as Wu-Tang Clan is consciously elaborated within capitalist practices — out of a necessity that acknowledges no outside to them — RZA has adopted the language and strategies of other such “brands”. But at the same time: what is the content, or meaning, of Wu-Tang Clan as a “brand”? That brands were physically applied to both animals and slaves, in the burning of a symbol upon flesh to signify the ownership of living property, and has been since adopted within the capitalist lexicon to signify not just ownership, but the

36. Ruthless to the point of routine violence and occasional murder, as in the case between the East/West hip-hop rivalry that led to the deaths of Tupac Shakur (Death Row Records, “West Coast”, d. 1996) and the Notorious B.I.G. (Bad Boy Records, “East Coast”, d. 1997). The East/West distinction is a construct: Shakur was from New York, though he claimed allegiance to the West. Unlike Dr. Dre and Suga Knight’s Death Row and Sean Comb’s Bad Boy Records, Wu-Tang remained uninvolved in such rivalries and emerged unscathed. For a concerted attempt to think past the ghettoized territories of hip-hop, see M.K. Asante, Jr.’s *It’s Bigger Than Hip-Hop* (2008).

37. Wu-Tang Clan could be read as articulating Grant Farred’s “black vernacular intellectual” with ghetto capitalism: “In the vernacular conception of politics, popular culture constitutes a singular practice. It represents that mode in which the political and the popular conjoin identificatory pleasure with ideological resistance” (2003: 1). (I read Farred’s “resistance” as thoroughly implicated within the matrix of populism and pleasure.)

content of what which is symbolised, is worth reflecting upon in the context of Wu-Tang. The Wu-Tang symbol — a “W” that resembles a bird in flight as well as a movement-gesture of Chinese brushwork, physically performable as a gang-style hand-gesture that is open-palmed in peace (in itself echoing the initiate gestures of the secret societies of Haiti and West Africa), but also reminiscent of a blocking or pushing move in kung-fu as well as tai chi — is the outward appearance of a “brand” whose trademark is both easily recognisable and yet cleverly encompasses a diversity of unusual influences whose effects and meanings are far from superficial.

In the grand fashion of the American Dream, RZA’s narrative unfolds from rags to riches. But what interests me here is not any claim to the RZA as an “outlaw form” or as celebrating an imaginary “marginality”, both of which, as Gilroy notes, are “official and routinized” (2004: 180). Besides RZA’s protean shifts of becoming, what interests me is how his narrative of exodus deterritorialises the authentic grounds of the ghetto; how his shape-shifting performs but also deforms the culture of celebrity and masculinity; and how, not in spite of the above branding practices, but rather as constitutive of them, RZA appears thoroughly concerned with achieving spiritual transcendence and enlightenment.

New York, the late 1970s through the ‘80s. In kung-fu films, the Five Percent, chess, and comics, RZA discovered various philosophies that salvaged him from the routine violence of ghettoized territories. RZA blended superhero aesthetics and technoscience, Taoistic warrior-monk and kung-fu training principles, chess strategies and Five Percenter “knowledges of self” into the MythScience of Wu-Tang Clan. The most extensive of these influences is the Five Percent, into which RZA was initiated at age ten. The Five Percent is an offshoot of the Nation of Islam founded in 1964 by Clarence 13X, a student

of Malcolm X and the Harlem Mosque, Temple No. 7. RZA's cousin, later known as the GZA, instructed him in the 120 Lessons, the Divine Alphabet, and the Supreme Mathematics. At age 11, the RZA says he was the youngest adept known to learn the 120, and he became a teacher to his own students (RZA 2009: 31). The 120 is a rote series of questions and answers that communicate the religious principles and MythScience of the Five Percent — to be acknowledged, one must reply in exact fashion to any question at any time; some questions and answers are pages long. The 120 were originally a secret set of texts divulged only to NOI members, who had to memorise them exactly as part of their initiation. In founding the Five Percent, Clarence 13X interpreted passages in the 120 as evidence that “the black man is god”, upsetting the NOI's religious hierarchy around the Divine Messenger of Allah, Elijah Muhammad. Leaving the NOI, and renaming himself Allah (which means “Arm-Leg-Leg-Arm-Head”, in the Five Percent), and in a move reminiscent of the Protestant Reformation, Clarence took the texts of the 120 to the streets, instructing followers that each black male was “god”, women “earths”, and that there is no one divine messenger. Allah's interpretation of the 120 bears some similarity to Sun Ra's earlier broadsheets, from 1950s Chicago, that called for a reading of the divine within. And like Ra, and contrary to the NOI's unambiguous designation of whites as “devils”, the Five Percent was cautiously open to acknowledging whites within their theistic system, and as part of the “five percent”. Allah infamously said that he was “neither pro-black, nor anti-white” (though debates remain to this day as to whether whites can be “gods”) (see Knight 2013: 110–12, 226–236).³⁸ The meaning of the phrase “Five Percent” refers to a statistics of oppression and enlightenment: that ten percent of the population knows

38. One of the “First Born” Five Percenters (one of the original initiates of Allah, who was murdered in 1969) was white: John “Azreal” Kennedy, who was institutionalised alongside Allah in the Matteawan State Hospital for the Criminally Insane (an institution that embodied the very worst of 1960s-era psychiatric practice, torturing, and sometimes killing, its inmates, who were disproportionately black, and like Allah, often sent there based upon the state's refusal to acknowledge “extreme” religious beliefs: Allah was condemned because he told the court he was (a) “god”) (Knight 2013).

the truth and meaning of existence, but these “elites” choose to keep the eighty-five percent in subservience and ignorance, while the five percent are those who know the truth, and are tasked with enlightening the rest (see Knight 2013).

Memorising and interpreting, or “building” upon the 120 during gatherings of Five Percenters (“parliaments”) in which any member could speak upon the texts proliferated a decentralised, word-of-mouth association, formally known as the Nation of Gods and Earths, that Muhammad Michael Knight characterises as “some sort of indigeneous African-American Sufism” (2013: 232). In the 1960s, while the fledgling (dis)organisation was still developing its doctrines through Allah, the Five Percent were embraced and supported by the Mayor of New York City, John V. Lindsay (1966–1973). Seeking to address rising black militancy, Lindsay created the Urban Action Task Force under Barry Gottehrer, whose task was to develop social outreach programs in disenfranchised and racialised neighbourhoods. The Five Percent was granted funding, including an all-but rent free storefront in Harlem in which to hold classes and meetings (see Knight 2013: 92–116).

The influence of the Five Percent upon early hip-hop culture in the 1970s has rarely been considered. Though the Five Percent suffered a number of setbacks in the 1970s after the murder — or probable assassination — of Allah in 1969, as well as a change in political regimes in New York City that sought to incarcerate (rather than embrace) radical black cultures, the Five Percent as a decentralised, autonomous, cellular structure of theistic culture, deeply entwined with the interpretation of language and number, and codified in a complex series of memorisation practices, continued to flourish. Indeed, the linguistic challenges of the Five Percent suggest that its spoken-word culture and attention to detailed inflections of language influenced the development of emceeing. The practice of “toasting” over

records had immigrated through the black Atlantic diaspora from Jamaica through DJ Kool Herc, among others, in the early 1970s (see Rose 1994). But it was the early Five Percenter emcees — RAMM:ΣLL:ZΣΣ, Afrika Bambaataa, Rakim, and KRS-One among them — who arguably elevated toasting into a more complex artform that produced sophisticated rhyme thanks to an ongoing development of the codified meanings of the Five Percenter lexicon. It is in this context, then, that the RZA's initiation among the Five Percent needs to be situated, as the second or third generation of Five Percenter emcees who carry in their flow not just a belief-system, but a social dis-organisation whose purpose was to elevate disenfranchised blacks from ghetto mentalities, teaching its members that they were “gods” (hence the oft-heard call-sign on hip-hop records: “peace, god”).

The Divine Mathematics and Alphabet are a codex for the Five Percent's theistic hermeneutics (“the Supreme”). For our purposes here — as the esoteric detail of this numerico-theomorphological system could consume this entire project — it is enough to state that the Mathematics proffer a hermeneutic system that calculates the numerical value of signs, what Felicia Miyakawa, a scholar of the Five Percent, describes as “*the* key to understanding everything in the universe” (2009: 31). The interpretation I divulge here — as my intent is to communicate the Afrofuturist inflection produced by RZA — follows from the RZA's teaching of the supreme wisdom in *The Wu-Tang Manual* (2005), though RZA's schema accords with those found in Five Percenter publications and scholarship.³⁹

39. For example, in various personal narratives of the Five-Percenter produced book of self-knowledge, *Knowledge of Self: A Collection of Wisdom on the Science of Everything in Life* (2010). See also Miyakawa's *Five Percenter Rap* (2005) and Knight's *The Five Percenters* (2013), both of which discuss the Five Percent in relation to hip-hop. Miyakawa is specifically attentive to the gendering roles of “gods” (men) and “earths” (women), where women are expected to undertake housemaking duties while men “provide”; however, Miyakawa argues that “earths have found creative ways to transcend their proscribed familial roles so as to become active voices in broader local, regional, national, and even global communities” (2009: 30). For an account of the Five Percent in the popular press concerning a 2003 Federal District ruling that guaranteed Five Percenters the right to practice their beliefs in prison, see (Smydra 2003). For a transformation of the Five Percent and other esoteric, religious and Africentric MythSciences into an Afrofuturist novel focused around Somali (and other) immigrants to Edmonton, Canada, see the inspiring and eye-opening *The Alchemists of Kush* by Minister Faust (2011).

In the Supreme Mathematics, the numbers 1 through 10 symbolize various principles, just as they correspond, in their combinations, to the 26 letters of the alphabet. Together, this alphanumeric codex allows text to be interpreted in its covert, theistic meanings, just as dates and numbers can be translated into meaningful text.⁴⁰

For example, I was born in 1978. $1+9+7+8 = 25 = 2+5 = 7$. Seven is “God and perfection. G is also the seventh letter of the alphabet, and for God. The original black man has seven and half ounces of brain, the devil only six ounces. God sees with the seven colors of the rainbow and hears the seven notes on the musical scale” (RZA 2005: 45).⁴¹ So we might look at 7 combined with other numbers from my birth, such as day and month — but none of this is astrology; for RZA, dates only signify if events occur. The RZA remembers that on June 6th, 1983 (06-06) he saw the ku-fung film *The 36th Chamber of Shaolin* (1978). “That was some prophetic numerology — 6, 6, 36 — and the movie had just that kind of impact on me”, writes RZA: “It was like something from the Old Testament or a Greek epic. It changed my life, for real, because its wisdom brought my own story alive” (2009: 52). In RZA’s MythScience, kung-fu films and their mediated, popular form of Taoism take the place of the canonical texts of Western myth and religion. The combination of the Five Percent and kung-fu is the first destabilisation of RZA’s territory: the “West” has become perceived through a Five-Percenter hermeneutics of a kung-fu film “East”.

40. “The meanings assigned to numerals are as follows: 1 = knowledge; 2 = wisdom; 3 = understanding; 4= culture or freedom; 5 = power or refinement; 6 = equality; 7 = god; 8 = build and destroy; 9 = born; 0 = cipher. Each number also has an extended definition that clarifies the number’s significance” (Miyakawa 2009: 31).

41. As for the devil, this is the white man in strict interpretations, or “the 10% who have knowledge but intentionally keep the rest ignorant” (RZA 2005: 44) — the interpretation that both myself and (at least it appears today) RZA favour. Of note, the Five Percent assessment of humanity bears some resemblance to Occupy’s mantra of “We are the 99%”, save that it divides society along different lines: only five percent will live a righteous life; eighty-five percent “are the mentally deaf and blind” (RZA 2005: 43), and the ten percent more-or-less corresponds to Occupy’s 1% of elite capitalists hoarding much of the world’s wealth. Occupy’s interest in symbolic mathematics as both a critical tool for evaluating inequality as well as a rallying identifier for collective action ought to be read alongside the Five Percent’s emphases of same. In some respects, the Five Percenter sociomathematics better accounts for the destructive force of ideology, though it doesn’t offer much hope in educating or revolutionising the 85%.

Throughout his two books, *The Tao of Wu* and *The Wu-Tang Manual*, the RZA reiterates how the permutations of the number 36 have assumed patternistic significance. Such alphanumeric hermeneutics suggest a way to chart, or at least mathematically symbolise, and thus attempt to interpret, events of transformation that feedback into MythSciences of reinvention. The Supreme also encodes ghettoized territory otherwise: its “projects” are now interpreted through an alternative value system of myths, applied knowledge, principles, and ethical conduct whose totality reshapes what the Five Percenters call “knowledge of self”.

The complexity of the Supreme and the demands required by memorising the 120 outpaced those of his highschool education, says RZA. In this respect, the Supreme challenges stereotypes of black ghetto anti-intellectualism, calling for, in the words of Grant Farred, a rethinking of “what constitutes intellectual articulation” (2003: 3). As the RZA writes in *The Tao of Wu*, “If you were poor and black, Mathematics attacked the idea that you were meant to be ignorant, uneducated, blind to the world around you. It exposed the lies that helped people treat your forefathers as animals” (2009: 40).⁴² On similar terms, Farred argues for a conception of the “black vernacular intellectual”, where the vernacular “encodes larger economic and political disenfranchisements” within the “hegemonic discourse” (2003: 17, 22). Farred’s examples include Muhammad Ali, Bob Marley, C.L.R. James and Stuart Hall; the Afrofuturist figures I discuss here — Sun Ra, Dr Octagon, Jimi Hendrix, Janelle Monáe, Jeff Mills, RZA, etc. — could all be, to various degrees, theorised in this arrangement, though what distinguishes the Afrofuturist inflection is the counter-reality production of MythSciences, on the one channel, and

42. RZA’s critique of his forefathers being “treated as animals”, though its immediate meaning is uncontroversial, belies a disregard for the animal, a suggestive exclusion from the warrior-monk becoming that also, I suggest, signifies the “place” of women. RZA’s positioning of the animal is in contrast to Snoop Dogg and Grace Jones’ becoming-animalia — even though I would suggest that all, in their unEarthing of the human, exhibit or undertake Afrofuturist trajectories of becoming.

the concepttechnics of becoming, on the other, that together destabilise Earthly categories and unground humanist identities.

RZA attributes the Supreme to his survival: it provided him the discipline in which to revision the ghettoized territory as Shaolin. But the “self knowledge” of the Five Percent is that of recitation and rote. While its counter-knowledge shifts the ghettoized boundaries of what constitutes black self-identity, its principles do not permit a self-questioning of its dogmatic tenets. “That’s what the lessons did for me”, writes RZA. “They gave me guidance, understanding, and freedom. But freedom from yourself? That’s often a whole different story” (2009: 41).

It is kung-fu that unsettles the Supreme. Screened in the porn theatres of 42nd street, these ‘70s-to-‘80s era Hong Kong action flicks provided the RZA with attractive myths of redemption and brotherhood, their survival stories overcoming adversity and evil through training, battle, and sacrifice. These kung-fu film values would shape the MythScience of the Wu-Tang Clan’s Shaolin warrior monk emcees.⁴³ RZA’s turn to kung-fu becomes pivotal in a fantastical escape to an off-worlding that exceeds the black-and-white confines of ghettoization. It also replicates a common vector of black vernacular intellectuals, including that of Du Bois and Malcolm X: that of an “afro-orientalism”, in which Asia is fetishised, theorised and/or visited as the site of a companion but alien other in the struggle against white supremacy, precisely *because*, as Bill Mullen explains, “Orientalism . . . fold[s] African Americans and Asian Americans into the same discursive trap of mutual subordination and, more important, separation” (2004: xv). RZA’s fascination with kung-fu, the legends of the Shaolin Temple and the (actual) Wu-Tang monks shape the infrastructure for the (hip-hop) Wu-Tang Clan: the latter’s

43. The RZA in particular mentions *The 36th Chamber of Shaolin* (1978) — the Blu-Ray reissue even features commentary by RZA — and *Shaolin and Wu Tang* (1983) as two of the most influential.

improper name, lyricism and rhyme, emcee character constructs, and symbols all derive from sampling kung-fu action films, the latter which provided a mediated “contact zone” in the depths of a sticky, late-night porn theatre. The kung-fu contact zone also lead to RZA’s later endeavours in becoming a kung-fu practitioner and student of Taosism, as well as his involvement in and hip-hop soundtracking of the animation series that exemplifies the Afro-Orientalist nexus, *AfroSamurai* (2007).⁴⁴

The third element that RZA envelops in Wu-Tang is chess (also discovered at age eleven). Chess is inscribed in Wu-Tang’s lyricism but also as strategy: RZA manipulates his Wu-Tang emcees like pawns; Wu-Tang’s corporate moves and its Five-Year Plan are conceptualised as a chess match. Chess also features *in* the kung-fu film dialogue that RZA samples on *36 Chambers*, where the game allegorises “Shaolin shadowboxing and the Wu-Tang sword style” (“Bring Da Ruckus”) and where “A game of chess is like a sword fight... you must think first before you move” (“Da Mystery of Chessboxin”).⁴⁵

Though by the late ‘80s all the pieces were in place for Wu-Tang — RZA’s cohorts were rapping the kung-fu film dialogues he had popularised by amassing a vast collection of VHS tapes; many of the nascent Clan were Five Percenters and chess players — ghettoized survival tactics (“crime”) nearly derailed its formation. In the early ‘90s, RZA became entrenched in the dead-ends of the ghetto:

I had become dumb. My life had done a zigzag. I was in the right place from ages eleven to sixteen. Then I got involved with women, drugs, and hip-hop in a street way — not just a hobby way where you’re having fun at your house, but a street way, with battling, guns, cars, gold cables,

44. In which a black samurai (“number one”) must repeatedly fight to the death every challenger, accompanied by a strange, joint-smokin’ sidekick who stages the black vernacular (this figure is later revealed to be the exterior symbolisation of the AfroSamurai’s unconscious self-doubt). This bloody epic becomes all the more surreal and violent, as the AfroSamurai must battle dream figures from the underworld, an android of himself, and technological weaponry with only his sword. RZA’s instrumental hip-hop brilliantly soundtracks this grisly but psychedelic anime masterpiece.

45. Wu-Tang’s music video for “Mystery” takes place on a giant chessboard. I am unable to ascertain whether the original (Cantonese) dialogue referenced chess or Go (or checkers). Granted the kung fu film production was based in Hong Kong, the British import of chess is entirely possible.

and drug dealing.

This is a man who had enlightened twenty other kids [to the Five Percent]. . . . Now my students were teachers. And here I am — someone who knew the 120 before he was thirteen — here I am acting like a fucking savage? I had to change — change back (RZA 2009: 94).⁴⁶

It is at this point that I would like to emphasize the problematic status of “women” in RZA’s discourse and the implicit framework of masculinity in the “warrior-monk” narrative, both of which I see as effects of a systemic phalloraciology that structures territories of impoverishment just as it structures heteronormative black identity.⁴⁷ RZA’s use of “fucking savage” is reminiscent of Lil’ Wayne’s invocation of “nigga” that opened this thesis. Both signal a fall into a stereotyping of black masculinist violence. The actuality of this stereotyping, however, suggests the effect of systemic conditions of racist and sexist capitalism. In *How Capitalism Underdeveloped Black America*, Manning Marable writes that “the superexploitation of Black women became a permanent feature in American social and economic life” (1983: 70). RZA’s narrative provides few loopholes from this implicitly masculinist environment, or from its explicit accounts of misogyny and sexualised violence, save where in contrast to misogynist hip-hop lyricism, RZA does not celebrate the latter, but rather attempts to account and repent for it.⁴⁸

46. It would require more space and time than I have here to unfold RZA’s language. It betrays a certain masculinist sexism that Wu-Tang, despite its MythScience, perpetually struggled with. RZA’s alter-ego Bobby Digital is particularly concerned with “bitches”. Also interesting is the use of “savage”, in a way similar to Lil’ Wayne’s deployment of “nigga” that opened the Introduction: on the one channel, an Afrofuturist distinction of the fallen to the transformed self; on the other, an internalised raciological distinction reminiscent of Fanon’s attempts to deconstruct the racism he had incorporated, as a child, toward the Senegalese (2008).

47. Marable notes how, since “the dawn of slave trade until today, U.S. capitalism was both racist and deeply sexist” (1983: 70). The national confines of such a statement can now be removed: racism and sexism are deeply embedded with the economic orders of globalization that structure the overdeveloped world to its sweatshopped peripheries and “rights-free” border-zones. I repeat Marable’s imperative that “no road toward the ultimate emancipation of the [global] working class exists outside of a concomitant struggle, in theory and in practice, to destroy every vestige of sexual oppression” (1983: 103) — not just “within the Black community” but without.

48. In itself problematic for its public confessionality that implicitly celebrates earlier excesses while seeking later apologia. It also proceeds by way of absences and ellipses concerning women. Nonetheless — RZA’s text (especially *The Tao of Wu*) is riddled with slippages, regrets, and fantasies that undermine the cool exterior of his “brand”. Intentional or not, they suggest a complex character whose text ought to be treated with gravitas and not dismissed as brand marketing (even though it inevitably is: Copyright RZA Productions). Snoop Dogg, in his “reincarnation” as Rastafari Snoop Lion, has also tried to remake himself as a Jah-warrior-monk, but with less success due to ongoing disputes over his Jah-thenticity, notably with Bunny Wailer (see the fascinating VICE film, *Reincarnated* (2012)).

The Enlightened category of the warrior-monk that RZA turns to in a flight from ghettoized violence is likewise phallogocentric (even if a becoming otherwise) — it demonstrates the constitutively patriarchal encoding of transcendentalism in asceticism. There are no female warrior-monks (or becomings otherwise) in Wu-Tang. However, on *Wu-Tang Clan Forever* (1997), the double-disc follow-up to the Clan's *36 Chambers*, the opening track ("Wu-Revolution") admirably attempts to reorient perspectives toward women in hip-hop culture, with Poppa Wu & Uncle Pete rapping about how "we lost the love", in calling "our" women "bitches" and "killing each other".

Finding himself entrapped in ghettoized violence, the RZA flees the territory and leaves Staten Island, returning once he has transformed his improper name. The act of renaming, amplified under the values of the Supreme, signals a reinvention of self:

In the Divine Alphabet, Z stands for Zig-Zag-Zig, which means Knowledge, Wisdom, and Understanding. It's the last letter of the alphabet and represents the final step of consciousness. So finally I just thought of the names as letters, as a title, not just a word. R-Z-A. It stands for Ruler-Knowledge/Wisdom/Understanding Allah.

In my life, I was zigging. I was going right but I zagged. I zagged and I almost died zagging. So I zigged back. I became the RZA. Rakeem Zig-Zag-Zig Allah. Later, people came to call me the RZA-rector — like I bring people back to life. But that year I found out the truth: The first person you have to resurrect is yourself (RZA 2009: 94-95).

In *The Tao of Wu*, RZA's narrative is punctuated by self-described transformative experiences and reinventions of consciousness. Permit me to skip the needle ahead. After parting ways with the Clan and his wife in 1997 — after finding international stardom and amassing significant wealth in the span of *five years* — RZA finds himself locked out of his New Jersey house. He spends the night on the lawn. In

a Siddhartha moment, he finds a flower: “And then — *bing!* — it came upon me. Enlightenment. And I was free” (2009: 136). Free from the burdens of leading the Wu-Tang — but not from suffering: “In 1997, my life fell apart, my Clan scattered, my girl of six years and I separated. So I moved out to California and became someone else. I became a superhero [Bobby Digital] because that’s exactly how it felt” (RZA 2009: 156). Enter B.O.B.B.Y. Digital.

Bobby Digital is RZA’s alter-ego, a black superhero that RZA identifies with Spider-Man, or Wolverine of the X-Men: a superhero with a dark side. Under the guise of Bobby Digital, RZA lived out a celebrity fantasy life in Los Angeles. “Like a superhero, I had two identities. If you saw me at a party, you’d think I was a party animal. But the next morning, I’d be up studying. I was reading Rumi, the philosophies of Marcus Garvey, all books from the Three Initiates — principles of mentalism, correspondence, vibration, polarity, rhythm — studying genetics” (RZA 2009: 158).⁴⁹ Bobby Digital is not, by any means, simply a solo release as a hip-hop artist. RZA *becomes* Bobby Digital. He has a suit built for him “like the Dark Knight’s — literally invulnerable to .45 bullets and knives” (RZA 2009: 165). He has the “Black Tank”, a bulletproof and bombproof Suburban. He has “a butler almost ready to act as my Kato”. Bobby Digital addresses the comic book trajectories of Afrofuturism noted by Mark Dery (1994a): Digital is the living embodiment of a black superhero, a comic book figure come alive that seeks to *transform* hip-hop’s ghetto realism.

Like Batman, Digital is a quasi-cyborg, where technology is integral to his superhero suit, his futuristic armaments and his secretive transportation. Like Sun Ra, Digital is a “living myth”, the transformed embodiment of a MythScience: entirely real yet entirely fictive. The ghetto and the

49. Another animalia: the party-animal, where the animal is alter-ego’ed. RZA’s Bobby Digital is his becoming-animal, his Snoop Dogg moment, where he is permitted to become the dirty stereotype his warrior-monk self otherwise denies.

superhero are *both* equally fictive, yet entirely real, constructs: real fictions. The “ghetto” is real, but a construct of sociohistorical and economic forces based on fictive (but entirely real) raciology; and from the reality of the ghetto emerges Digital, *for real* as a *living myth*.

Greg Tate writes that hip-hop, in its sampling of the musical archive, is “backward-looking and forward-thinking at the same time” (in Dery 1994a: 211).⁵⁰ Tate’s observation situates the activity of chronopolitics to hip-hop, as the musical production of hip-hop samples the past to remake the future. But Bobby Digital, for all of this technoscience, is also a retrogressive alter-ego that plays in the past. I wish to underscore that RZA is entirely self-critical on this point: Bobby Digital, he writes, is about “reliving a hip-hop past that got sidelined when I became the RZA . . . someone I created as an escape from the pressures of being the RZA — someone who could rap, act, and dress in a way that the RZA couldn’t” (RZA 2009: 165). Moving to Los Angeles and spending his nights *becoming* Bobby Digital on the celebrity club circuit, RZA indulges in all the fantasies his warrior-monk self could not. His language, dress, and style all change. He only answers to “Bobby”. What is interesting about this indulgence in celebrity culture, however, is that RZA did not perform the *RZA* as a celebrity. Rather, RZA crafted a MythScience to play the celebrity. This was not particularly in his best interests: in the late 1990s, the “RZA” brand would have had greater name recognition than his re-branding as Bobby Digital. Nor does the content of the re-brand correspond to its celebrity performance: Bobby Digital is a celebrity myth that is also a black super hero with a secret agenda of liberating the ghetto.

Digital’s ghetto liberation is staged in its domestic violence as much as its technoscience. With Digital, RZA weaves a complicated narrative around masculinity. The album *B.O.B.B.Y. Digital In Stereo*

50. This figure is reminiscent of Benjamin’s Angel of History, which is also the title of Eshun’s Afrofuturist film with the Black Audio Film Collective, *The Last Angel of History* (1995).

(1998) is replete with skits and lyrics that celebrate the superhero's black virility. But on "Domestic Violence",⁵¹ Bobby is told off by his coterie of female lovers: "Your rings ain't shit, your piece ain't shit, Bobby you ain't shit...". This continues for a full minute. Eventually Bobby steps in, and threatens to "step in and slap dicks in your mouth". Digital's emcee flow descends into a bickering brawl with his female entourage, before he launches into another rhymed rant where he states that he'd "rather beat my meat" than keep his "hoes". The track ends with a bitter quarrel, before closing with a minute of instrumental beats. The comparative quiet of the piano-laden rhythm allows the significance of the unsettling performance to sink in. "Domestic Violence" is a complex work that stages black masculinist stereotypes of women (and vice-versa) while lyricising their respective languages of caricaturisation. Its tone and song structure do not celebrate masculine arrogance. Nobody wins. Neither party has the last word.⁵² Rather, it stages the sorrowful play of domestic tragedy that afflicts even closet superheroes. Its imperfection from any sort of idealised relationship is also what renders its meaning accessible to a widespread audience.

Becoming Bobby Digital in Los Angeles, however, lead to what RZA describes as the first of two "lessons". For RZA, these are lessons from the cosmos.

In 2000, RZA's mother dies: "That year, 2000, I learned how much superpowers cost you, what you lose when you let your ego or your alter ego run things" (RZA 2009: 164-65).⁵³ The second lesson is the death, at RZA's studio, of the Clan's Ol' Dirty Bastard — like GZA, one of RZA's cousins — from an accidental overdose of cocaine and tramadol in 2004, just two days shy of his 36th birthday. After these

51. And perhaps parodying, in its own way, the domestic troubles of Spiderman or Superman.

52. Though Digital, and not his "hoes", is the superhero. Nor does Digital invite any women to join him on his mission. Nor does he encounter other female superheroes (or any other superheroes, for that matter).

53. Or rather, RZA's alter-alter-ego.

two “fatal” lessons, “I was depressed for years. I didn’t do much, didn’t see many people, mostly stayed in the crib” (RZA 2009: 185).⁵⁴

This time the RZA’s resurrection is through love. He meets his new partner and muse. Arriving at more or less the present moment of publication, the RZA compares his own self-transformations to those of Malcolm X: “History is full of bad men who redeem themselves to become great. Malcolm X — he came up chasing white women⁵⁵ and sniffing cocaine, but found Allah and changed. But what about people who have knowledge and go *back* to doing wrong?” (2009: 157).⁵⁶ It is this last question that preoccupies the RZA, and is symbolised in the Zig-Zag-Zig of his name, the symbol “Z” that traces the transformative path of his life — in his own words, the “steps of consciousness” that do not always ascend. The Zig-Zag-Zig names an “alter-destiny”, or *destinerration* inherent to becoming: the outcome of becoming cannot be pre-programmed from the start.⁵⁷

In many respects, and compared to the sexist belligerence of *bling* that pervades corporatised hip-hop, RZA’s construct of his self-mythos remains conspicuously humble.⁵⁸ Granted that such “humility” encodes patriarchy and sexism in its supposed neutrality, RZA’s narrative attempts to come to terms with the violence, machismo, criminality, and misogyny inherent to stereotypes of black masculinity.⁵⁹

54. The word-association of “the crib” with “the ghetto” (by no means a term unique to RZA) suggest a complex maternalism of the sign as a home-site of safety, but also as a womb of overprotection that severs contact with the exterior “world”. Its inside/outside dichotomy is structured through a phallogocentric discourse of birth and penetration.

55. If RZA has come to terms with (black) women, his embrace of X’s black nationalist sexuality remains problematic for its positioning of (white) women.

56. Again: the association of (white) woman with drugs, of woman as a drug. I do not wish to sideline these concerns: the deprivileging of woman, while love nonetheless remains the saving grace of RZA’s life, is constitutive of the warrior-monk hip-hop mythology and its masculinism/sexism.

57. The term “destinerration” arrives by way of Derrida, as “*destinerring* of missive”, of that which is never in its proper place (the letter, desire, lack, presence, *destiny*) (1995: 260).

58. Conspicuous granted the violence in which RZA and the other Wu-Tang Clan members were enmeshed. Jeff Chang recounts how *The Source* blacklisted Wu-Tang after Masta Killa punched one of its freelance journalists (2005: 427).

59. Paraphrasing Gilroy’s assessment of Snoop Dogg (noted in last chapter), I also suggest that RZA’s “work exceeds the masculinist erasure of the sexual agency of black women [and of women in general] that it undoubtedly contains” (2004: 204). These excesses are both intentional and unintentional to RZA’s narrative. What RZA seeks to control unseats him. He struggles with what he calls these “lessons”.

This includes the staging but also becoming of stereotypical black masculinity in Bobby Digital that nonetheless undoes itself in “Domestic Violence”.

Since Digital, RZA’s becoming has undertaken a trajectory where, instead of continuing to *reprazent* the militancy of a “Protect Ya’ Neck” masculinity championed by the early Wu-Tang, RZA has turned to a discourse that practices what bell hooks calls “engagement with the practice of love” (2013: 194). This love — though perhaps not as “full-on” as hooks would like — is coordinated through multiple axes of what hooks calls “self-actualization” — chess, kung-fu, Taoism, the Five Percent and music — where “we must recognize love as the transformative practice that will free our minds and bodies” (2013: 194).⁶⁰ RZA emphasises the transformative role of love as saving him from depression. This narrative should not be dismissed.

Unlike other Afrofuturists, RZA is not an alien. He is, however, a warrior monk of Shaolin.⁶¹ It is the admixture of influences that registers the Wu-Tang Clan as an Afrofuturist endeavour: it overlays heterogeneous timelines in a transformation of sociogeography, thus initiating collective becomings. Kung-fu is sampled just like the archives of funk and jazz that constitute hip-hop’s musical structure. The world is *named* differently by the Wu: it is restructured otherwise through an inventive hermeneutic drawn from a combinatoriality of influences. With Wu, the “ghetto” has been deracinated, estranged, distantiated, through the undertaking of an Afrofuturist exodus. The Afro-Orientalist Shaolin of Wu has replaced it. This is not to uncritically appraise it. Street life is warrior-monk training, and (as Wu-

60. There is a bookish intellectuality to RZA that defies masculinist stereotypes of blackness that see the latter as wholly subsumed under figures of athleticised and eroticised, but intellectually deficient, bodies (see Gilroy 2004). Nor does RZA satisfy the stereotype of the “AfroGeek”, in a manner reminiscent of Steve Urkel (see Dery 2014). It is the admixture of both, doused with a trajectory toward Shaolin, and the Afro-Samurai, that calls for the designation of becoming.

61. RZA as a warrior-monk is no hyperbole. He studies under Master Sifu Shi Yan Ming, Founder and Abbot of the USA Shaolin Temple. The two met in 1995 at a release party for GZA’s *Legend of the Liquid Sword*. “Before I met him”, writes Ming, “I mostly listened to Buddhist music” (in RZA 2009: vii).

Tang recite) “only the few will survive”.⁶²

I *am* from that era in hip-hop, the era of violence and attitude. I helped found that shit, because that’s how I felt at the time. I don’t repudiate it. But at the same time, all that aggressive, ignorant, nigga-ghetto shit isn’t naturally me. It was a product of history and my environment (RZA 2009: 192).

The ghetto is genetic programming. How does one overcome the incorporated inferiority of white mythology? As Bobby Digital, the RZA is supremely interested in genetics as the source code of the naturalised ghetto. Becoming-digital means becoming genetic, becoming remixable: tuning into digital signals that clear up the “environment” and allow one to revision and remap the territory. The *digital* is Supreme Mathematics — the codex for reading the genetic ghetto programming one has been born into. In the unreleased “amateur film” *Bobby Digital In Stereo*,⁶³ Bobby is trying to end gang violence;⁶⁴ he wants to distribute weapons, but

there’s some crooked police that won’t let the static die because there’s too much money in drugs and guns in the ghetto and they force Bobby underground.

Underground, he has a laboratory where he makes this serum called the “honey serum”, which he

62. Later incarnations of Wu-Tang, particularly the latest release of Killah Priest, *The Psychic World of Walter Reed* (2013), offer a much more nuanced take on what might be heard as an “Astro-feminism”. Priest proffers critiques of ghetto realism, and, as far as I can tell, only enunciates “nigga” once — “the stupid nigga” — in a temporally fragmented narrative of a couple caught with a stolen object that results in an unnecessary and tragic murder (on “Currents of Events”; its shattered temporal structure perhaps surpassing Nas’ epic of reverse temporality, “Rewind”, on *Stillmatic* (2001)). The balance of tracks on this two-disc release focus on a cosmic mythology that, in sheer Afrofuturist and astral distantiation from ghetto realism, elevates thought into interstellar mythologies. Notably absent are the usual sexual boasts and derogatory misogyny. Priest often names female winged creatures and alien goddesses (alongside male) in his mythological pantheons (see “Lotus Flower”, “Winged People”, “Visionz”). The elevation of the female form to goddess, however problematic, is conjunctive to a pantheon of otherworldly deities.

63. Hopefully to be released in 2014 with the last Wu-Tang Clan album, *A Better Tomorrow*. This is also one of few instances where drugs are viewed not as a vice, but as a technology of transformation.

64. Like The Electrifyin’ Mojo, radio disc jockey in 1980s through 1990s Detroit, who is credited by Mad Mike of Detroit techno outfit Underground Resistance for disrupting gang warfare in the mid-’80s. When Mojo would play certain tracks (the landing of the Mothership, the B-52’s “Rock Lobster”, Prince), his broadcast influence was great enough that ghettoized listeners would get down and boogie, flash their porch lights, and honk their horns (see Mojo 1995). Such outbursts of public weirdness made it difficult to maintain a macho pose and apparently estranged violent confrontation into rock-lobster dances.

used to make honey-dipped blunts. And when he hits one, it transforms him, opens up his consciousness (RZA 2005: 90).⁶⁵

The theme of the “underground” — a metaphor for the obscure, the secret, the hidden-in-plain-sight — is literalised in Digital’s laboratory. We are drawn to Ralph Ellison’s science fictional novel *The Invisible Man* [1947],⁶⁶ in which the protagonist hides underground, in the basement of a skyscraper, blinded by lights, seeking similar changes in perception by smoking a blunt laced with the jazz of Louis Armstrong.⁶⁷

The underground allegorises the organized exodus of the Underground Railroad and metaphorises cultural authenticity. But as a subterranean invention of *place*, it suggests that Afrofuturism need not always to look to the stars for an off-worlding. In the film, Bobby Digital *becomes* digital: “He has transformed himself”, writes RZA, through a computer experiment in his underground laboratory. The result is that “he can travel through digital signals” (2005: 90). But the ghetto cannot: the ghetto remains stuck in time with antiquated analog technologies:⁶⁸

65. Investigation pending.

66. Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* (1947) is “a literature predicated on both realist *and* speculative modes of fiction” (Yaszek 2005: 298); Ellison says in the introduction to the thirty-year anniversary edition that *Invisible Man*, as “a piece of science fiction is the last thing I expected to write” (cited in Yaszek 2005: 298).

67. And in which the question of the cloistered renegade of a protagonist is left hanging: as *who* or *what* will the Invisible Man emerge after his hermetic retreat into the brightly-lit basement — and *what* are we to remake of the human after “shaking off the old skin”? “As I said before, a decision has been made. I’m shaking off the old skin and I’ll leave it here in the hole. I’m coming out, no less invisible without it, but coming out nevertheless. And I suppose it’s damn well time” (Ellison 1947: 503). Like Digital’s, the basement lair is technical and auditory. It is humming with electricity. Hundreds of lightbulbs are strung from the ceiling; the room is more brilliant than the sun. The conditions of emergence, of deprogramming, of deskinning, are artificial, technical, cultural, electrical. Is this not a Frankensteinian laboratory? Has not the Invisible Man erased all shadow to see the minimal conditions of (his) self, what is finally visible once the *who* has been discarded, and now “casting off the old skin”, emerging as something *else*, something *other*? To the Invisible Man one might juxtapose the newly skinned Max Disher in George S. Schuyler’s satiric *Black No More* (1931). Max sheds his skin by way of the “pigment” technology of African-American biologist Dr. Junius Crookman. The skin-shifting “sanitarium” is designed to “solve the American race problem” (2000: 36). With his new white skin, Max has shifted from one sort of skin-deep subject to another; his reskinning has only emphasised the *whatness* of the human construct to begin with, its ability to be reskinned. Whereas Max changes *skins* to find “himself” the same, the Invisible Man changes *selves* to find his skin the same....

68. Bobby Digital’s assessment of the ghetto as analog and of its futurist solution as digital echoes arguments concerning the “digital divide” detailed in chapter one. However, his solution is on the order of MythScience, where the “analog” is not a de facto state of technological impoverishment but an allegory for the genetic programming that is the “real fiction” of the ghetto’s socioeconomic construct. The “digital” is the reprogramming of self, and cannot be reduced to an attempt to alleviate suffering through technoscience.

In the movie, [Bobby Digital] is going through the ghetto, noticing that there's a digital revolution going on in the world around, but the ghetto's stuck in analog. They don't have Internet access, don't have digital phones. So his mission is to implant a little signal into man, so they won't have to rely on anything else for entertainment or to get information. So he puts the digital information into a bullet. Instead of shooting you and killing you, this bullet awakens you. It digitizes you.

When you become digital, you become digits — pure Mathematics. So to be digital means to see things clearly, for what they are and not what they appear to be. For Bobby Digital, man is like an antenna; and we walk on too much concrete to stay grounded. So this breaks our frequency. This is also a lot like some understandings of chi, the way some kung fu teaches you to stay grounded for more power.

So Bobby Digital is about what molded me: comic books, video games, the arcade scene, breakdancing, hip-hop clothes, MCing, DJing, human beatboxing, graffiti plus Mathematics and the gods. That's hip-hop to me (RZA 2005: 90–91).

What the Wu-Tang demonstrate is that “ghetto realism” has always been a fiction — a real fantasy — programmed by forces of racism and structural inequality, capitalism and colonialism, and as such, can be reinvented and restructured. Even digitally: into signals, recodified, reprogrammed. The RZA ends his book with “wisdom” — as he imagines the possibility of “super-consciousness”:

Strive for the super-consciousness that comes at the end of life — strive through meditation, through love, through building, through creation. Ignore the forces of darkness, separation, and death. Tune out the voices that don't want you to grow, to change, to resurrect yourself. Ignore forces pulling you back into the past (RZA 2009: 198).⁶⁹

69. RZA's turn against the past is not against *the* past, however: Wu-Tang's entire MythScience is based upon a chronopolitics of resurrecting the past, even as it rejects that which *confines* you to the past (the “ghetto”, stereotypes of violent black masculinity, etc.).

Chapter 06

Calling Planet Earth

C'mon Ra, how do you convert your harmonic progressions to energy? There's an African Space Program, isn't there? Now why haven't we heard about it? Please, Mr. Ra, just tell us!

— CIA agents to a tied and bound Sun Ra, in *Space Is the Place* (1974)

The music of Alice Coltrane and Sun Ra, of Underground Resistance and George Russell, of Tricky and Martina, comes from the Outer Side. It alienates itself from the human; it arrives from the future. Alien Music is a synthetic recombinator, an applied art technology for amplifying the rates of becoming alien. Optimize the ratios of excentricity. Synthesize yourself.

— Kodwo Eshun, from the introduction to *More Brilliant Than the Sun*, “Operating System for the Redesign of Sonic Reality” (Eshun 1999: 00[-004–05])

This backward order of things — first you write and then you figure out what you are writing about — may seem odd, or even perverse, but it is, I think, at least most of the time, standard procedure . . . The writing this produces is accordingly exploratory, self-questioning, and shaped more by the occasions of its production than its post-hoc organization into chaptered books and thematic monographs might suggest.

— Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (Geertz 2000: v)

• • •

Calling spaceship Earth!

Planet spaceship Earth!

Mother spaceship Earth!

And you're outward bound...

Destination unknown...

Destination unknown...

You haven't met the captain of the spaceship yet, have you?

No, you haven't met the captain of the spaceship yet, have?

You're on the spaceship Earth...

You're on the spaceship Earth...

And you're outward bound.

Destination unknown.

— Sun Ra & His Omniverse Arkestra, “Calling Planet Earth”, on the live album *Destination Unknown* (1992)

Time to meet the Captain — not of planet Earth but of the Solar-Hieroglyphics Arkestra, the Intergalactic Myth-Science Arkestra, the Outergalactic Discipline Arkestra, the Alter-Destiny 21st Century Omniverse Arkestra, in total, the Captain of the 44 known variants of the outerspace Ark of Afrofuturist Transgalactic Astro-Infinity jazz, Sun Ra.¹

This chapter is titled “Calling Planet Earth” because it explores the ambivalence Ra has for the planetary grounds of Earthly belonging. His ambivalence, however, is undecidable: Ra off-worlds / words from Earth. Ra is unEarthly, uncanny, and unhomely; his thought tends toward “destination unknown”. This is because, I will suggest, Ra is an *exoterracist*: he proliferates means to *exeunt terra cognita*. Such means produce unknown destinations: alter-destinies. The means to proliferate alter-

1. For a list of the 44 known variants according to John Szwed, see (1998: 95).

destinies include, alongside of music and performance, printed texts of various sorts: song lyrics, pamphlets, and broadsheets, but also “poems”. I leave “poem” in quotation marks because Ra’s “poetry” is unorthodox as well as unclassifiable — it is often performed, in his music, in a call-and-response round, as a “lyric” sung in strange keys by June Tyson, or chanted, ritually, by his band.² Like RAMM:ΣLL:ZΣΣ, it could arguably be said to enunciate a “lecture” or “meditation”.³ I say “somewhat” unorthodox as some other quasi-poetry of the mid-twentieth century would be comparable, insofar as it eschews rhyme and meter and focuses on the patternistic significance of signs in performance and structural presentation.⁴ Though these “poems” have been printed as “poetry” in various publications, nowhere, to be noted, does Ra declaim such text as “poems”. Thus the borders, as well as contents, or genres of the text itself are ambiguous. What matters then is not how such “poems” are classified, but in what ways they signify.

Ra’s *texts*, then, remain unique for their themes of outer blackness: the void but also manufacture of space, history and memory; the cosmotheosophical significance of music; and for their exploration of

2. Hartmut Geerken, the Cairo-based jazz player (who played with Salah Ragab when Ra and the Arkestra came to Egypt in 1984) and editor of *The Immeasurable Equation: The Collected Poetry and Prose of Sun Ra*, writes of the “one hand call/response elements, which have found their direct way from Africa into the Nw World and the conjuring up of ritual elements” and the “sung songs which, through constant repetition, generate strong magical energies and counter energies” (2005: xxi–ii). Then there is the “contemplative poetry, often articulating sociocritical implications” in which Ra “uses the language of the mystics”, written in the “form of a recitation or proclamation or continue in a kind of self-contemplation” (Geerken 2005: xxii).

3. See RAMM:ΣLL:ZΣΣ’s “Lecture” on the Gettovetts album, *Missionaries Moving* (1988). Set to an industrialised, hip-hop rhythm track (produced by Bill Laswell), RAMM’s opening salvo discusses Aristotle and Michaelangelo, delving into the history of remixology, the scratch, graffiti and letter-writing, a theme also taken up in “Biblical Verses” and “HIS-STORYS Crockery” on the compilation album, *When Writers Attack! Vol. 1* (2011), both of which detail the “assassin’s knowledge” of letter manipulation and the history of (graffiti) writing.

4. Besides the general break with rhyme and meter that is present in free verse, Ra’s specifically linguistic interventions are, at times, akin to concrete poetry, visual poetry, and L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry, but also poetry designed for performance — keeping in mind that Ra’s “poems” are also often “song lyrics” (“Space Is the Place”, “Calling Planet Earth”, etc) (see Bernstein 1998). Ra’s poetry also bears upon Amiri Baraka, who cites his influence (1999; 2011), as well as that upon Gil-Scott Heron (though Heron is a master of flow and rhyme, in the Last Poet’s invention of what would be later dubbed hip-hop; see (Scott-Heron 2000)). Though Ra’s poetry may bear some structural similarities to works by Fluxus or DADA, conceptually there is no connection: Ra is not concerned with upsetting any sort of “tradition”, art or otherwise, and certainly not in producing non-sense or art for art’s sake. His “poems” are artful de/codings of cosmological and theosophical *principalia* that are coordinated through Ra’s extant MythScience. This confluence of influences can be heard on his spoken word record, *The Outer Darkness* (2010) (thanks to Dave Pires for digging this rare reprint from the crates).

the meanings of existence in outergalactic destinations unknown — combined with their philosophical labour upon the time and space of language. The place of “philosophy” here is particularly resonant, precisely because those intent upon boundary policing would exclude texts of this type, relegating them to but “poetry”, and deny such texts the force of elaborating “assertions”. Such acts of policing, I contend, not only replicate the Platonic expulsion of the poets from the Republic as but imitators of simulacra, but ignore the whitewashed cultural norms that everywhere underpin the European tradition’s supposedly acultural, rational, transcendental, or “grounded” principalia of justification. Or in the words of John E. Drabinski, the problematic is that “professional philosophy” refuses to contend with the “idea of [its] justification as a cultural expression [and] not a self-evident set of conditions, which means philosophy’s boundary policing is a cultural problem” (2014).

My emphasis upon Ra as a *philosopher* is not to deny that Ra’s texts conduct other kinds of operations, those often deemed “poetic”, or rather, that tread in the warp and woof of language. The question, then, is one of admitting into the Eurocentric stronghold forms and structures of thought from elsewhere that grapple with questioning in the multiplicity of ways that “philosophy”, as love of wisdom, suggests. The call to read Ra’s work as but “poetic” can thus operate as a backhanded operation of exclusion. To think that “poetic” operations necessarily exclude the ability of such texts to make “assertions”, or conduct forms of meaning-making that are, nonetheless, “philosophical”, insofar as they contend with *questions* that are everywhere thought within, but also upon such contested borders of philosophy, only betrays what Kristie Dotson calls a Eurocentric “culture of justification” — with the emphasis placed upon the *provinciality* of this “culture” — that excludes diverse peoples (and works) from its domain so as to safeguard its unthought, and I contend, raciological mechanisms. Such cultures

of justification privilege “*prima facie* congruence with norms of disciplinary engagement”, whose norms “assume the existence of commonly-held, justifying norms that are . . . univocally relevant” (Dotson 2012: 7). To think, then, the unthought cultural presumptions of philosophy: such was the point made by Derrida in deconstructing philosophy’s white mythology that privileged some unthought metaphors over others, specifically the metaphor of the “ratio”, that which underpins “rationality” in the circular orbit of its metaphysical logic (see 1984). In short, the disciplinary police of *white* philosophy would no doubt exclude Ra from being thought as a philosopher — or as a figure whose thought contends with and challenges the European fortress of philosophy, preferring instead to safely contain his thought as but “poetry”. And despite vocal claims that today, philosophy adheres to diversity, “diversity” is not just a question of *who* writes in philosophy, today, but of *what* or *whom* one writes about: what topics, histories as well as figures, are properly “philosophical”. But to think that such figures, in order to be properly philosophical, must exclude the messy regions of the cultural, political and the poetic, is a *racialised* privileged. Drabinski writes that “the racialized privilege of thinking without cultural and political considerations — the idea that racial injustice is only a concern if one wants to be political — is set out in explicit, undeniable terms [in boundary policing]. That is, and I’ll be plain here, the disentanglement of political questions of racial injustice from properly philosophical questions is not just an expression of racial privilege, but, precisely because it is that expression, is itself premised upon racial injustice” (2014).

This problematic is highlighted when thinking a figure such as Ra. The problematic of MythScience, and whether its counter-reality operations signal an underlying relativism, for example, cannot simply be thought upon an apolitical “grounds”: not when such apparently neutral “grounds” have been wielded as

racialised weapons of exclusion by the principalia of the philosophical tradition. The very necessity itself of “grounding” philosophy from relativism in itself is called into question. And it is upon this terrain — terrain that is cosmic, not Earthly — that Ra operates. To turn to Drabinski again, “One cannot find philosophy in black Atlantic traditions without intertwining cultural and political questions with ideas of knowing, being, judging, and theorizing action. So, to begin, those excluded traditions threaten to scramble habits of compartmentalizing philosophy and its starting points” (2014).

This decompartmentalising, or rather constitutive contamination of philosophy will begin, as Derrida reminds us, in the heart of metaphor: in the policing of what sorts of languages, or texts, are appropriate to philosophy. Those admitted will be “grounded” by “justified” means, which is to say, remain congruent to unthought cultural norms. Undoubtedly a black sonic theorist of MythScience, an alien Pharaoh whose very work explores the *ungrounding*, or *unEarthing* of thought, would be excluded a priori. In what follows, then, will emerge an interplay between words and worlds: between the shifts of phonemes and letters as apparently ir-rational operations that destabilise the “ground”, that unEarth assumptions that the ground is the only site of adjudicating, or justifying, meaning, as well as life and death. Just as Copernicus (as the story goes) dispelled the myth that Earth was the centre of the universe, Ra will unEarth the planet from its unthought centre as the grounds upon which the philosophical questioning of what it means to be human must (apparently) stand. And he will do so in a way that draws upon hieroglyphic, occult, and cabbalistic counter-traditions that read words as acronyms and alphanumeric permutations of encoded meaning, undertaking a kind of textual permutation, graffiti, or slippage of signifiers and phonemes that is to be found elsewhere in philosophy, particularly in the work of Derrida, notably *Glas* (1986b) but also *Dissemination* (1981a).⁵ Thus, there is

5. I will not have the space to develop these linkages here: but a reading of RAMM:ΣLL:ZΣΣ, Sun Ra, and Derrida are required, in

the (im)proper precedent. Even if on the fringes of deconstruction.

Ra takes apart words / worlds and sets them loose into alter-destinies of thought. And, unique to almost any other thinker, poet, or philosopher of the 20th century, Ra interprets signs through an alphanumeric codex for which there is no apparent master text. Thus some of my purpose here is to develop a number of small connections between Ra's (recently) published texts. At times, I describe Ra's work as "cabbalah", in quotation marks, for the cabbalistic operations described here, in the transmutation and esoteric hermeneutics of text, are likewise heretical to any received theosophical tradition — though they derive from occult and theosophical readings of Biblical sources (among others).⁶

But this encounter with the Captain is not just with Ra. I wish to propose that Ra's unEarthliness unsettles another: the philosopher of Earthliness, *dasein*, and of the ground of Being, Martin Heidegger. In a transcultural collision, of sorts, taking place in an ungrounded space for which there are no clear rules of engagement — what I will posit, through Homi K. Bhabha, as a "third space" — Ra's texts will be brought to bear upon a specific moment in Heidegger, one in which the German philosopher, in 1942, meditates upon *das unheimlich* — the manifold meanings of the "uncanny", unearthly and unhomely — during a summer lecture course at the University of Freiburg. There is another avenue of justification for such a task: Heidegger reads poets for the occasion, poets who are also unlike other poets: Rilke and Hölderlin, but also the choral ode of Sophocles' Antigone.

But to approach this "third space" will require a further intervention: of reading the technicity of the

this aspect, to coordinate their engagement with Thoth and the hieroglyphic aspects of the text that permutate and disseminate meaning (or what RAMM calls, the "slanguage tree" of "Alpha's Bet").

6. Ra's focus on the hidden meanings of signs is not unlike the "supreme wisdom" proposed by Clarence 13X (Allah) and John 37X (Abu Shahid) in 1964 — the "divine science", or supreme mathematics, alphabet, and wisdom of the Five Percent (discussed at the close of chapter five).

human, turning to Stiegler and Kittler, Derrida and Heidegger. This reading will be brief, its purpose, alien contact with Ra's "invented memory".

• • •

Alien contact: an exo-biographical beam-up. Appearing as a hue-man infant in Birmingham, Alabama, and discovering his true name of Le Sony'Ra in 1952, Sun Ra sought alter-destinies on spaceship Earth from 1914 through 1993. In 1936 (or possibly 1937), Ra was abducted by aliens.⁷ Ra, 22 at the time, was enrolled at the Alabama State Agricultural & Mechanical Institute for Negroes in Huntsville. He was trying to find God. According to John Szwed, Ra's biographer, Ra had been closely studying the Bible, theosophy, maps of the Holy Land, and biographies of preachers (1998: 26–28). Before Ra found God, however, aliens found Ra, and revealed to him his alter-destiny:

...these space men contacted me. They wanted me to go to outer space with them. they were looking for somebody who had that type of mind. They said it was quite dangerous as you had to have perfect discipline.... I'd have to go up with no part of my body touching outside of the beam, because if I did, going through different time zones, I wouldn't be able to get that far back. So that's what I did. And it's like, well, it looked like a giant spotlight shining down on me, and I call it transmolecularization, *my whole body was changed into something else*. I could see through myself. And I went up. Now, I call that energy transformation *because I wasn't in human form*. I thought I was there, *but I could see through myself* (my italics, Ra, in Szwed 1998: 29).

The aliens turned to Ra as he had discipline. Ra would demand discipline of the Arkestra: in precision playing the unusual time signatures, notes, and phrasings he had composed, and in the pursuit of an ascetic communal existence (Szwed 1998: 113–15). Sun Ra's jazz is not "free jazz": it is not the

7. As narrated to Sinker (1992) and discussed in chapters two and three.

result of spontaneity, but the precision playing of composition, even when its notation calls for the undecidable but signifiable “Space Chords”. Ra understood music, as Szwed notes, as “both a model of the universe and a part of its makeup” (1998: 113).⁸ This is another way of saying that Ra disciplined his big-band ensemble, the Arkestra, to sound-out off-worlds, a “music of the spheres” that went beyond the spheres known to music:

Music of the spheres: of the outer spheres
For there are dimensions
That are, yet are not
This music is of the outer spheres
Of the Kingdom of Not . . . the void
For it is of the unsaid words
Concerning the things that always are to be,
So that from the unsaid words,
Which are not
Because they are of those things
Which always are to be
Nothing comes to be in order that
Nothing shall be because nothing
From nothing leaves nothing.
— Sun Ra, first stanza of “Music Of The Spheres” (2005a: 81)

8. Szwed claims that Ra “charged his music with Neoplatonism”, though he quickly defers to the pre-Socratics, Damon of Athens and Pythagoras, as the source of later “magical musicologists” including Anselmi, Ficino, and Agrippa (1998: 113). Ascribing Ra’s philosophy of sonic-cosmic discipline to neoPlatonism, however, runs counter to Ra’s Kemetianism (his library betrays more occult and Kemetian sources). “The music of the spheres”, if drawn in Eurocentric lineage from Pythagoras, in-itself can be traced from Pythagoras to the philosophies of vibration-sound in Kemetian Ma’at (in *The Egyptian Book of the Dead*) but also in Hindu mythology (the *Ramayana*). It is also here that one encounters modern theories (some “New Age”, others “technological”) concerning the construction of mesolithic architecture (including the pyramids) using vibration-sound techniques. Ra’s theories of sound-vibration occur in several texts. In “Words” (1980): “A word when spoken is a sound / A word when thought is a vibration” (2005a: 217). And of course, in texts on music, where “Chaos is music and celestial harmonious” (“The Other Side of Music” (1980) (2005a: 123), and “Twin Vibrations (1972)” in which “Vibrations sound both heard and unheard / Vibrations both seen and unseen” (2005a: 197) are “BALANCED ON THE / PIVOTING PLANES OF SOUND” (2005a: 133).

Playing the music of the outer spheres meant traversing the void beyond the spheres known to music: the Kingdom of Not, of the unsaid, in which futurity resides, the “things that always are to be” but are Not. The general maxim of traversing impossibility toward potential — because the impossible is but the unrealised which always already has been potential — resonates through Ra’s work. Manifesting the impossible, then, is world-making through words / myths / music. Hartmut Geerken draws attention to Ra’s (musical) play between (outer) worlds and words, in which Ra cautions the reader, “Ah, the magic of words . . . Best not let them touch you. / There is poison on the blade” (Ra 2005b: 66). Playing with words catalyses worlds: this is the ritual meaning of sounding-out words in their incantation: such are the recitations of Ra’s texts *as* poems in the repetition of the Arkestra’s chants. This is the “magic” of words, a “magic” that, as I will turn to below, is but a technology literalised: a MythScience-making “occult medium”. Thus in dealing with the “magic of words”, we are dealing with wor(l)d-engendering technologies: MythSciences. Geerken, who compares Ra’s philosophical poetry to that of Meister Eckhart, Nikolaus von Cues (Cusanus), and the “polaristic linguistic equations of Salomo Friedlaender”, writes that “these are dangerous words, as dangerous as some kinds of music (and maybe some writings), which Sun Ra held well away from public view because he did not consider the people mature enough” (2005: xxiii, xix). Hence Ra’s ambivalence toward Earth: his *heliocentrism*, in which, like Friedlaender, Ra does not “consider the earth [his] home but the sun. Ultimately, they do not see the sun as being above them but the earth below them” (Friedlaender, in Geerken 2005: xix).⁹

Ra does not stand alone. He belongs to a counter-tradition of jazz magic that off-worlds through wording. The heritage of Afrodiasporic musicians, notes Szwed, is one in which “communal order and

9. Geerken is engaged in a long-term project to connect the thought of Ra to that of early-twentieth century German mystic / philosopher and avant garde writer Salomo Friedlaender (1871–1946). None of Friedlaender’s (obscure and rare) works are (yet) available in English; Geerken is involved with a project to publish all 35 volumes (!) of Friedlaender’s work (first in German).

survival are modeled in musical performance” but also “where the universe can be constituted from the interaction of the musicians” (1998: 114).¹⁰

Playing music meant becoming disciplined: becoming a disciple to space music, music whose discipline is of the depths of the “outer darkness”, that reaches beyond thought to *tone*. In “Angels & Demons”, Ra writes that

my music sings of the discipline of depths
and darkness of space as matter
and matter of outer space as tone, and it
relates — reaches beyond the void to stars
beyond the places of thought — worlds
without names
(Ra 2011: 8)

Ra’s discipline is exacting as it seeks to sound-out worlds without names: in its sounding-out, it incants words whose worlds have yet to be unvoided from the outer blackness. Names are named without naming, but through music: “The name can be music”, writes Ra, “played by infinite instruments, / The name can lift splendor-vision from nothing on to / reality-myth” (1972 version 2, 2005a: 83). Music names splendor-vision, what in version one of this poem Ra calls “nothingness”, into “reality-myth”, which in version one means “keep[ing] the myth parable apparent” (2005a: 82). Wording off-worlds through music: these are operations of MythScience.

Ra explains, in different terms, of the “potential” to be held from “impossible” myth and its relation

10. As I have discussed in chapter three, John Coltrane was influenced by Ra’s broadsheets (in particular the alphanumeric codex, “Solaristic Precepts”): his last album, *Interstellar Space* [1967], released after his death, reaches beyond the “love supreme” towards Ra’s outer darkness of space.

to music:

The beauty of music is that it can reach across the border of reality into the myth . . Impressions never known before can be conveyed immediately. A sincere universal mind can universalize the world by the simple act of doing so. But that idea is of the myth and it is of the myth which I speak. The potentials of the myth is inexpressible because it is of the realm of the impossible.

Myth demands another type of music, it is all because of the necessities of another age which needs another type of music which has not been of the known reality before. Music then will have a different place in the sun (Ra 2005b: 453).

The rest of this essay will, at times, do nothing less than explicate these two paragraphs. And all of Ra's poetic enunciations / incantations. Ra's words are to be read in their MythScience as off-worldings. The "universal" signified above is of what Ra will call the *omni-verse* — the becoming-space of outer darkness. *Universalizing* the world takes place through the "universal language" of music, music being the tone formation between words and worlds, the vibration-sound that tunes one to the other. The process of universalisation is that of *off*-worlding: it is drawing out from Earth the many into the universality of the omniverse through music. Of course, this is impossible: mythical. Thus it is "of the myth which I speak". But do not be deceived: myths, as impossibilities for Ra, are potentials: they nonetheless *do* "act". "Act" here must be read in its MythScience: an actor acts in a fantasy; but action *does* take place. The "I", for Ra, the "I" of which Ra speaks, is such a myth: "If I told you, 'I am from outer space'", writes Ra, "You wouldn't believe a word I said" (2005a: 51). Yet this is precisely what Ra tells us. He dares us to unbelieve. But it is the "I" itself that is the myth: it is the "living parables / parallels": the "living myth" of "man" that is "manufactured" and "fictitious" (Ra 2005a: 60, 130). Ra

is — his *existence* — is such a myth. But no more “myth” than “man” (Ra 2005a: 60).¹¹

A note here on Ra’s MythScience. As a strategic deployment of constitutive fantasy, MythScience dismantles the provincial barriers that guard science from myth, reality from fiction. It sees the division of the real to fantasy as yet another myth, or what Ra calls a “fantasy in a real sense”, from which he distinguishes his own impossibility, a “fantasy in a false sense”. This distinction of two forms of fantasies are established in “The Myth of Me”, when Ra says that “For nothing else is half as real / As the myth of me” (Ra 2005a: 82). A further distinction is elaborated in the opening lines of Ra’s poem “stranger from the sky”:

I am not a fantasy in a real sense
I am a fantasy in a false sense
yet I exist
(Ra 2011: 14)

Ra’s MythScience emphasises the constitutive role that myth, or rather, how the fiction in a *false* sense plays in the science of the *real* myth. The binary of “real” and “false” are both ordered on the side of myth. “Real” fantasies are those that are hegemonic: they are that of “consensual reality”, the reality that everywhere declares and assumes itself as such. But it is no less myth than those “false fantasies”, those myths that appear as false to the real (myth). MythScience produces false fantasies to the real, thereby, at times, revealing the latter as just such another fiction: a “fantasy in a real sense”. Mythscience establishes myth as a futurist strategy: a strategy of altering the coordinates of the real myth so that an AlterDestiny

11. Geerken will explore the shared heliocentrism of the “magic-I”, a phrase that appears in both Ra and Friedlaender: “Friedlaender and Sun Ra have drawn their conclusions by declaring earth a meaningless battleground which they rise, self-assuredly, above, assessing the world by their own standards from a state of individual suspension (Friedlander: ‘Only by floating can one trust the abyss’), and refusing to acknowledge death (Sun Ra: ‘Give up your death!’; Friedlaender: ‘I am the death of death’)” (2005: xxiv).

can be activated. By a futurist strategy, I mean a chronopolitical strategy: for MythSciences are likewise deployed in the past to remake the future by altering the coordinates of the present.

To return to the universalisation of myth: music. And its discipline. Ra writes that “Music is a plane of wisdom, because music is a universal / language” (2005a: 85). Upon this plane, Ra is a “tone scientist”, an “architec[t] of planes of discipline” (2005a: 126). Discipline is required — for tone scientists — as the universal language of music meddles with the cosmic vibration of every-things: “Music is existence . . . a living soul force . . . Sound . . . Cosmic Vibration . . . Life” (2005a: 85).

• • •

Ra had to stay within the beam for his body to remain intact. The uptake by aliens changed Ra’s form: his body is transmolecularised, changed into “something else”. He can see through himself. Ra had become the embodiment of Ralph Ellison’s “Invisible Man”, save that a “man” he is no more, perhaps never was — as Nabeel Zuberi writes, unlike Ellison’s “earthbound black subject, Ra found himself on Saturn. There the aliens instructed him to educate the Earth’s people” (2004: 81).

Ra returns to Earth with a mission.¹² “The universe sent me to converse with you”, he says: “If there are ears to hear, listen, but do not listen with yours ears / alone / You must feel with your intuition-sense” (2005a: 198). Ra continues: “There is still something missing here”, he says, speaking of “this planet”: “a greater need than all the rest” (2005a: 198). Ra offers music to meet this need. For Earth, and its Earthlings, are out of tune with the cosmos. Earth, hanging in Space, is always out of Place. Music, however, is “one of the bridges to the treasure-house / Of needs fulfilled” (2005a: 198–99). And music

12. Hartmut Geerken recounts that “toward the end of his life Sun Ra . . . had grown a beard and dyed it red. . . In Africa, in the Middle East and in India extraordinary men dye their beards red in order to sensitise themselves for their mission and their way on earth” (2005: xviii).

can re-tune the planet: “For those who are in tune with Nature’s Cosmo-plan-plane-design / Can hear what untuned ears cannot” (2005a: 199). What can tuned ears here? A number of things, which is “a part of everything”: “the meaning of the natural-beist / The Living Being-Beist”; in which “The Space sea has many sounds of be-issness: / The akasa, the unknown acoustics, the alter planes of isness and notness” (Ra 2005a: 199). Tuned ears can tune into the “sound riddle” of the Living Being-Beist, which is not one but plural, and has many sounds of its be-issness, alter planes of its being that traverse what is and is not: becomings.

Ra returns from the alien ship, turning down the invitation for an intergalactic trip: Ra has remembered — through alien-induced anamnesis — that he too is as an ancient alien, as the return of an alien Pharaoh from Saturn, whose “ground” is not that of Earth but in higher orbits to the Sun. It is Ra’s mission on Earth to reveal, “beyond other thoughts and other worlds”, the “potentials” for Earth — through outerspace jazz, that “dial point of vibration intensity” (2005a: 140, 174). Ra was sought by aliens as he had the necessary discipline for space travel. But where did he acquire this discipline? Ra turns them down because he already has activated a becoming-alien. He does not require abduction. Ra had already been abducted, somehow, *to Earth*. This memory, however, of his alien past, has been voided. Ra discovers that “the past is a fabrication thing / Some fictitious one-dimension fantasy” (2005a: 132). Geerken writes that, for Ra, “history was an obvious lie, an illusion, deception and imagination in the power of opportunism” (2005: xxi). For Ra, memory is an “invention”: a “storehouse of manufactured, unschooled conceptions, / conclusions and beliefs” (2005a: 60). The “implanted memory” has been “kept alive by the / Teachers of the invented memory, who closed their eyes” (2005a: 61): those real myths that have sought to erase the past of the Afrodiaspora, the wonders of Kemet, and

render neutral, if not transcendental, the provinciality of European thought. So it is that “His story is history, but my story is mystery!” (2005a: xxi).¹³ This mystery is that of the void: the outer blackness. And that only music, in tune with the cosmos, can (at)tune (to) this void: “The music of the outer darkness is / the music of the void” (1980 version, Ra 2005a: 129). Ra’s mission is guided by a necessity, then, brought about by his alien abduction and anamnesis: “THE SPACE AGE CANNOT BE AVOIDED” (Ra 2005a: 139).

UnEarthing Esoterrorism: the Exoterrac

Weird dancing in all-night computer-banking lobbies. Unauthorized pyrotechnic displays. Land-art, earthworks as bizarre alien artifacts strewn in State Parks. Burglarize houses but instead of stealing, leave Poetic-Terrorist objects. Kidnap someone & make them happy.

Pick someone at random & convince them they’re the heir to an enormous, useless & amazing fortune — say 5000 square miles of Antarctica, or an aging circus elephant, or an orphanage in Bombay, or a collection of alchemical mass. Later they will come to realize that *for a few moments they believed in something extraordinary, & will perhaps be driven as a result to seek out some more intense mode of existence.*

— Hakim Bey, from “Poetic Terrorism” (my italics, 1991: 4–5)

By the provisos set above by “ontological anarchist” Hakim Bey, Sun Ra and the Arkestra practice Poetic Terrorism. Ra and the Arkestra will have you believe, if only for a second, that their (off)world is real. This “belief” — a sign that hangs in suspense between fact and fantasy — is intensified when faced with the reality of the act: that the offworlding enacted by Ra and the Arkestra takes place, that the act

13. My thinking here is indebted to Harmut Geerken.

becomes fact, the actor a factor in the counter-myths of reality.

I turn to the phrase “esoterrorism” in this section as it has been deployed to describe the actions / actors of Afrofuturist counter-traditions as a whole. This will also draw us closer to a consideration of magic, technology, and “occult mediums”.

Simon Reynolds, in his tome on rave culture hedonism and music, *Generation Ecstasy*, writes of the “‘black science fiction’ tradition of esoterrorists (hermetic renegades from consensus reality) and otherworldly dreamers” (1999: 224). His description is brief. It draws, however, from the anarchist advocate and foremost theorist of Poetic Terrorism, Hakim Bey (a.k.a. Peter Lamborn Wilson). In *T.A.Z.: The Temporary Autonomous Zone, Ontological Anarchy, Poetic Terrorism* (1991), Bey calls such hermetic renegades from consensus reality “poetic terrorists”. Poetic Terrorism (PT), as described above, seeks to shatter the consensus of normalised worlding. PT is about engendering intense affect:

The audience reaction or aesthetic-shock produced by PT ought to be at least as strong as the emotion of terror — powerful disgust, sexual arousal, superstitious awe, sudden intuitive breakthrough, dada-esque angst — no matter whether the PT is aimed at one person or many, no matter whether it is “signed” or anonymous, *if it does not change someone’s life (aside from the artist) it fails* (my italics, Bey 1991: 5).

Bey’s closing sentence signifies the stakes of PT: of catalysing an affective response that upends belief-systems, that destabilises the default parameters of worlding — what Reynolds calls “consensual reality” — in its unintentional participants / shocked and random observers. PT must “change someone’s life”, or rather, the worlding in which the meaning and parameters of “life” to “death” take place. These are the stakes.

However, a point: Afrofuturists such as Ra conceive themselves not just as otherworldly dreamers but as offworld aliens.

I would like to propose a modification of signs. “Esoterrorist”, despite its evident echoes with “esoteric”, remains something of a misnomer, insofar as it would appear to signify a limited deployment or exclusive circle of practitioners dealing in (eso)terroristic affect. The same goes for “Poetic Terrorism” — even though, as I will turn to below in Heidegger, *poiēsis* reveals its constitutive meaning to *technē*, a relation of magic as the mythologisation of technology. But “Poetic Terrorism” is still bound to terror/terra. Before continuing, this term for Afrofuturist affect demands its replacement. The “terroristic” affect of Afrofuturism — and this is the meaning Reynolds and Bey mean to signify — is produced in the violence to the senses wrought by esoteric, poetic encounters: here, “terror” would be that shock of the encounter with the strange, alien, or uncanny, not only from *without* (the exo-teric) but from *within* (the eso-teric). The esoterrorist explores and generates that affect which paralyses, not in fear, but in the hesitation of unbelief that takes place when “transmolecularised” to other-worlds, in the apprehension of that which is neither of this world nor completely without it.

In place of Reynold’s esoterrorist and Bey’s Poetic Terrorism, another sign proposes itself by way of a switch, slurring, or sampling of homophonic units that signifies an other-worldly trajectory. This alter-sign resonates with Afrofuturism’s outerspace aesthetics, offworld concerns, and alien endeavours: the *exoterrac*.¹⁴

A few notes on this sign. Whereas “esoteric” knowledge is that of the mystic, supposedly accessible only to the initiate, and the “exoteric” that of a projected, common objectivity, otherwise and often

14. And not “exoterrist”, not just to avoid confusion with “exoterist” (a follower of exoteric knowledge) but to emphasize the *exo-terra*, not the *terror*.

mislabelled as “commonsense”, *exoterrac* knowledge echoes signs from elsewhere: signals from SETI.¹⁵

Here, its esoteric magic is that of an unknown technology: all can access its other-worlds with the appropriate cosmological tunings or conceptechnological pick-ups. Exo-terrac is all that (is) alien or magic from without / within: in its prefix, it signals the unEarthly, of all that is occult and alien to *terra*: terra as Earth, *terra cognita*. The exoterrac imaginary arrives by way of adrift signifiers from the offworld, echoes of the alien, vibrations from the “Space Outer”, music of the Omniverse, magic encounters of the outergalactic, “Immeasurable in its multiplicities and potentialities”: “Of the greater impossible and the equation-enigma / Reality-Void” (Ra 2005a: 128, 134).¹⁶

But this *immeasurable equation* is also the potential in which the reality of impossible myth shape-shifts, and in whose interstices the alien is figured, not only as the visitor from “out there”, but as the alterity of the alien within, in which Space Outer becomes “Outer Space Inner”:

Beyond other thoughts and other worlds
Are the things that seem not to be
And yet are.
How impossible is the impossible
Yet the impossible is a word; a thought
A thought
And every thought is real
An idea a flash of intuition’s fire:

15. The Search for Extra Terrestrial Intelligence project, carried out through radio telescope.

16. And that, at the limit, approaches Stanislaw Lem’s diction of the Solaristic: a completely unassimilable knowledge, a wholly unintelligible but affective alien. Polish science fiction writer Stanislaw Lem argued that the truly alien is ultimately unknowable (*contra* Philip K. Dick, whose recently published *Exegesis* details a multiplicity of theories as to how his 1974 mystical encounter signals the duality of the divine *and* the alien (see 2011)). See Lem’s *Solaris* [1961] (2011); the science of “Solaristics” is the field dedicated to an endless hermeneutic of the alien planet’s watery surface which is in a perpetual state of becoming (notably, see Andrei Tarkovsky’s 1972 film adaptation which focuses on the personification (and temporality) of the planet’s affect as it takes shape in unconscious embodiments of desire: organic androids made from the stuff of dreams). This example is not “Afrofuturist” *per se*, but its science fictional aspect of the unassimilable is perhaps unsurpassed.

A seed of fire that can bring to be
The reality
Of its self.
Beyond other thoughts and other worlds
Are the potentials
That hidden circumstance
And pretentious chance
Cannot control.
— Sun Ra, *The Potential* (1980) (2005a: 140)

Not unlike dub music's originary remixes, there are three extant versions of this text by Sun Ra, the first from 1965. In each iteration, Ra substitutes signifiers, adds ellipses, and subtracts commas, until the version above, which dissects its own signs, separating "itself" into "its self" and emphasising the heliocentric flash of *fire*. Sun Ra is taking his cues from Egyptian texts, and the use of "fire" draws from the divinations of the Egyptian God Ptah, who fashioned the universe out of fire.¹⁷ Several theses occur in the above text:

i) That "beyond other worlds and thoughts" — which is to say, off this world, and its terrestrial thought — exists the potential to overcome impossibility: those "things that seem not to be / and yet are";

ii) That *impossibility* is a word, a thought: but a word-thought that is "real": a writing that affects reality, which is to say, is constitutive of the reality-myth;

iii) That a word can (*off*)*world*: a flash of intuition that realises that, even if impossibility is but a word whose thought is "real", it can be overcome by a "seed of fire that can bring to be / the reality / of

17. In any case, it would be, perhaps, an error to read "fire" as the *logos* of Heraclitus. Ra's coordinates are Kemetian.

its self [itself]”: by wor(l)ding other thoughts, impossible as it may be, other wor(l)ds may be seeded — disseminated — those potentials beyond impossibility “that hidden circumstance / And pretentious chance / Cannot control”.

Ra is playing upon the reality-myths of language: the affective impact of signs to construct worldings. Bey and Reynolds above describe the same with esoterrorism: but here, the exoterrac trajectory departs from Earth towards the outer darkness. Why is this necessary? Because for Ra, the stakes are of the Earth itself, and its designation of the “hue-man being”: “The word that was made flesh was made fresh” in the “testament new”, a new testament that demands to be made fresh / flesh again: recreated, “reiterated . . . proclaimed, illusionated / Devious truths”, for buried within the “cosmic reach” of the “test-terster-testament” are “Dark meanings brought to light / See the mystery / Hear the sound duplicity” (2005a: 29). Between *r* and *l* is the sound duplicity, the mystery to be heard: between word and wor/d, between *f*lesh and *f*resh.¹⁸ Certain impossible constraints — in particular, the human *race*, the “human form” in which “imprisoned we” (Ra 2005a: 58) — are but fresh/flesh words, real-myths in themselves as thoughts, but words nonetheless that can be overcome by seeding the fire thoughts of other worlds. Ra’s turn to the other-wor(l)dly is what renders his work *exoterrac*: it undertakes a trajectory on a course “outwards bound”.

Afrofuturist exoterracism adheres to what Sun Ra calls the “discipline” of becoming an “alter-self”:

18. It should be noted that we are already in the realm of a Rasian deconstructive movement of the letter: of symbol-letters whose absence/presence shifts meanings, notably the very boundary between word and world. This deconstructive strategy is not borrowed from Jacques Derrida. It arises without hesitation in Ra — and beginning, like Derrida, in the early 1950s. Neither are points of origin: both are confluences of texts. The deconstructive unpositioning would see that the deconstructive movement of letters signals the destitution (Derrida’s word) or Alter-Destiny (Ra’s) of *différance* for which no conscious agent is necessary for its effect. The apparatus of technicity would in-itself bring these movements into effect, as consciousness is but an effect (“myth”, says Derrida) of *différance*. If “writing-in-general” is expanding within history, and thus, writing it (a Derridean thesis I will turn to below) then its effects should be felt everywhere beyond the particular inquiries of Derrida. Here I also mark another site, to be explored elsewhere: the letteristic word-symbols of RAMM:ΣLL:ZΣΣ that undertake a systemic “war” against “Alpha’s Bet” and the entire sign-system of graffiti and its burners, throw-ups, armed letter carriers, and arrows.

All that I am is a visitation and that is the meaning of the natural alter-self. If you are dissatisfied with yourself in the scheme of things and the altar has not changed conditions, perhaps you should consider the alter. After all if anything changes, it will be through the word alter/ alteration/alternative because how can you dare to speak of change if you do not have an alternative? The alternative to limitation is INFINITY. Yet, be warned! Infinity is precision discipline. Infinity being INFINITY is naturally of duality because and as it is written, “The secrets of wisdom are double to that which is.

— Sun Ra, New York, January 29, 1968 (Ra 2005b: 471)

Ra continues to new tester the testament: to seek alternatives to the altar, to push past his earlier Biblical studies by making the word fresh / world flesh.

Exoterracism constitutes a trajectory of becoming: it demands the discipline of the alter-self that overwhelms the performativity of a dramaturgic or theosophical enunciation. It is also a double operation: double to what is, becoming undertakes an alter-self that reflects back upon what is in the movement toward what it is not. Suspended above the void, in the trajectory of becoming, the infinite held within duality requires discipline: for implied is the “danger” of words, of falling into infinity, of voiding the alter-self entirely. Thus other words / worlds must be the destination unknown: other planets, planes of myth. Alter-selfing is not a becoming without an-other plane(t).

In the act of its proliferation beyond a “mere” appearance or resemblance, alter-becoming raises the question as to whether what undertakes the alter-selfing remains a hue-man — for would not the “self” become an “object” of myth? When Ra proclaims “I am the alter-destiny!” and “I am a living-myth” in the film *Space Is the Place*, Ra implies a becoming, suspended above the void of infinity, that *on the plane of reality-myth*, traverses the coordinates of the *who* to the *what*. The alter-self becomes a living-myth:

the act becomes an actor, the fact a fantasy, from the vantage of the “fantasy in a real sense”. What is traversed in the alter-self are the coordinates of what Bernard Stiegler calls “the invention *of* the human” (1998: 134).

The Invention of the Hue-man

This relation to technics is not something to which a given body must yield, adjust, etc. It is more than anything something which transforms the body. It is not the same body that moves and reacts in front of all these devices. Another body gradually invents itself, modifies itself, conducts its own subtle mutation. — Jacques Derrida, in *Echographies of Television* (2002: 96)

At stake, then, in the analysis of exoterrac alter-self is not just its “cultural”, “social”, or “diasporic” coordinates — as I have discussed in previous chapters — but the *magic* of its becoming. Or, in short, its *technicity*: for here I will read “magic” as the technology of myth. Alter-selfing implies the reinvention, or in Ra’s words, re-creation, reiteration, and proclamation of new tester flesh: the “invention of the human”. This invention, I will suggest, is bound up the magic / myth of technology, or rather, technics in general.

In this section I explore the *technicity* of becoming: the technical conditions of possibility for that-which-invents (the *what*). Here, I turn to the work of Bernard Stiegler, who writes upon the technicity of emergence, the substrate or technical phylum in which becoming operates. Stiegler reverses the metaphysical account of human agency, in which humans produce or invent technologies, by placing technicity as the general condition of possibility for “life”: technicity is “the evolution of the ‘prosthesis,’ not itself living, by which the human is nonetheless defined as a living being” (Stiegler 1998: 50).

Coterminuous to the “evolution” of “species” is the “evolution” of technicity, as that materialisation in which *différance* takes shape (as it is everywhere finessed or surpressed). The evolution of species — the invention of the human included — is co-constitutive to the evolution of technicity.

Stiegler’s description of a technicity-at-the-origin means that “the technical dynamic *precedes* the social dynamic and imposes itself thereupon” (Stiegler 1998: 67). Technicity follows the logic of the supplement: technicity is actualised as technology (it “imposes itself thereupon” the sociocultural and biological dynamic) and yet precedes it: technicity is the condition of possibility *for* the sociocultural realm. Technics is the general condition *of* prosthesis, the (im)possibility of artifice held at the origin; technologies are the “prostheses” invented (but are not strictly “prostheses”, but internal to the technical dynamic in which the human is but an invention). We can see then how technicity follows the temporal logic of the supplement — as that which is added on to make the thing whole to begin with — because, as I will further explore, technicity is actualised as the “technological” coordinates of the graphematic structure (*arkhe*-writing).

What Stiegler calls the technical dynamic — the field of technicity — is materialised in technologies: specific technological objects that *exteriorise memory*.¹⁹

Becoming, as the technical unfolding of a singularity, is technico-historically constellated, Stiegler argues, by technological objects that become ever the more strangely autonomous, uncannily prescient and occult, because they exteriorise memory. Becomings take place within a network of mnemotechnics that have exteriorised, which is to say, encoded, cultural memories. Becomings are thus effected within a

19. As developed in Stiegler’s reading of Leroi-Gourhan (see 1998: 70). And which is not to say that technicity itself is *immaterial*. But “materialisation” remains the shortcut in metaphysical thinking for a bringing-forth into presence, as granted, my aim here is not to think the problem from the side of *différance* — to do so would require a very different sort of text.

general system of mnemotechnics. Objects that “exteriorise memory” are technologies: writing, in its general system of graphematics, is the first such exterioriation. As recounted in chapter five, the system of writing (*arche*-writing) is at the origin: it is the graphematic of the trace (of *différance*).

Exteriorisation, then, does not come to befall a primary interiorisation (i.e. a pure origin or plenitude of presence) but produces the latter as its effect. This is another way of saying that technologies are not “prostheses” understood as additional to the human being, but are constitutive of it. To recapitulate: technological prostheses — the “exteriorisation of memory” in *mnemotechnics* — are, in Derrida’s sense, *supplementary*: they fill or satisfy an unnecessary gap or need (that was never there to begin with), they come after to make the thing whole to begin with. “Exteriorisation” is the word granted to technical supplementarity. “Exteriorisation”, then, takes place as internal to the technical dynamic.

The *temporality* of becoming is thus exteriorised, which is to say, it operates by way of technical supplementarity. The eventfulness of temporality, writes Stiegler, “is shot through by the dynamics of a *what* — or a tertiary memory from which the *who* can never disengage itself” (1998: 270). The supposed sanctity of the *who* is brought into its exteriority (“being”) among a field of tertiary memory (the *what*) that precedes it and shapes its becoming-exteriorisation. This too is another way of saying that technological objects constitute the system of memory, of writing (in general), that human being(s) see as exterior to the presence of an ontological and temporal interiority and yet, such technics constructs the conditions of the latter (and its metaphysical schema). The human is born into and by technologies because it *is* such a technology (or rather *becomes*, in its invention, qua technics).

Implied here is a further point: such “exterior” or “tertiary” technologies cannot simply be disregarded or obliterated: the *who*, as an invention, a production of tertiary mnemotechnics, is

constituted through technicity, *even when the latter's objects are absent*. This latter point — that one does need the *presence* of the mark, of visual writing, of the proper name, etc., as in Derrida's critique of Lévi-Strauss' reductive anthropology of the Nambikwara — to nonetheless “have writing”, as the systemic finessing and suppressing of *différance*, the graphematic of the *trace*, is crucial. It is important because it distinguishes Stiegler's schema of technics from any “political” intervention that would seek to recover a pure *who* by eradicating technological objects (exteriorised *whatness*). This point is even more crucial when one considers how some unhumans are already considered to exist not on the side of the *who*, but the *what*. Where the division of the *who/what* divides itself among humanity (which is also to say that humans are conceived as interiorities *opposed* to exterior technologies), as enforced by the violence of raciology, technics has been metaphysically exteriorised on the one side, while the sanctity of the pure *whoman* has been safeguarded from (technico)miscegeny on the other. In such schemas (as in the Earthly worlding that persists to this day) there arises the division between slave and master, android and human, and all such hue-manist-raciological classifications of the *who* to the *what*. Stiegler's reading of Derrida, on the points above, shifts the *topoi* of the *who/what* to taking place on the side of the *what*. The *who* is but an effect or myth of the *what*. The (political) effects of Stiegler/Derrida's intervention should now be more clear: all humans are artificial inventions. This leaves the field open for becoming otherwise.

We are drawing closer then, to art, and to Heidegger:

i) Art, because for Sun Ra, “Greater music is Art. / Art is the foundation for any living culture” (2005a: 139). An equation is at play here: Greater music + Art = foundation + living culture. What is music? “Music is lightness and darkness / Precedent of vitality” (2005a: 123): music, as the play of

lightness/darkness, of that which is and is of the Kingdom of Not, is the condition of possibility of life. “Every place there is . . . there is music . . .” (2005a: 123): music is foundation: which means, it *is* foundational to place, to the placeness of the “is” in the outer darkness. Ra’s equation between music/art/foundation, when translated through the Graecophilic discourse of Heidegger, articulates a structural *poiēsis*. Which is to say, it constitutively conjoins with *technics* (“art”).

ii) Heidegger, if only because, at least at first, Sun Ra’s “texts resemble the vague hermetic statements of Martin Heidegger”, says Geerken (2005: xxiii). But neither, I will suggest, are vague in an uncertain sense (though both are vague, as in vagabonds). Both Ra and Heidegger shift words into equations, where one word divulges a manifold of other wor(1)ds. But also because their interests intersect, in the conjunction of technology and art, insofar as both structure the wor(1)d. In encountering Heidegger, however, I am cautioned by Paul Gilroy, who writes that “we should be prepared to acknowledge the forms of linkage (in my view neither wholly necessary nor wholly contingent) that can be shown to connect to the Nazi cause the works of important figures like Heidegger . . . those who have sought to redeem these figures and their genius from the taint of Nazism . . . [understand Nazism] to be external to whatever they had to say that is enduring or valuable” (2005). I would like to repeat: the human is an invention. Heidegger’s thought is interior to his Nazism, howsoever that is interpreted, and does not befall his work as an exteriorised mistake. It is on the inside of the work, as all exteriorities are. Yet my task here is not to explicate “Nazi” features in Heidegger’s work (such features often strike out in multiple ways), but to draw a difference between the kind of poets Heidegger reads (Hölderlin, Sophocles, Rilke), and what he reads from them, and the kind of Afrofuturist, exoterrac philosopher poet that Sun Ra is, and what he says of the same fundamental concern: that of human being upon

Earth.

But we are not there yet. First, to begin with art.

The political effect of Stiegler's reading is that there can be no concrete politics, or philosophical system, that could seek to eradicate "exterior" technologies without dividing the invention of the human from itself in a violent demarcation of the unhuman to the human that would seek to erase the former so as to preserve the latter. In short, a technicogenocide. I also understand this point to be inferred by Heidegger. Let me demonstrate. In the ending to his oft-cited essay, "The Question Concerning Technology", Heidegger meditates over that "other possibility" before which he is "astounded":

that the frenziedness of technology may entrench itself everywhere to such an extent that someday, throughout everything technological, the essence of technology may come to presence in the coming-to-pass of truth (Heidegger 1977: 316–17).

The meaning I wish to take from Heidegger, at this point, is the inverse of the astounding, or rather, speculates upon *why* Heidegger is astounded: that any politics (or philosophy) that seeks to eradicate technology will fail to erase anything *technological*. In fact, it is the opposite that would take place: the erasure of all that passes for "beauty" in humanity, its art, or *poiēsis*. Ra, as Heidegger, will cite beauty: "love of beauty is the only way to produce art", says Ra (2005a: 139). And Heidegger will say that "once there was a time when the bringing-forth of the true into the beautiful was called *technē*" (1977: 315). I will suggest that there is no need for the "once": Ra demonstrates precisely how the conditions remain for unEarthly beauty. One just needs to abandon the hEarth. But we are getting ahead of ourselves.

In Heidegger's questioning of technology, the "essence" of technology is revealed not to be anything "technological" in-itself, but draws itself closer to a revealing in which Heidegger suggests an older

meaning of *technē: poiēsis*.²⁰ Heidegger's Graecophilic argument is that "once there was a time . . . in Greece" — and I here repeat — in which "the bringing-forth of the true into the beautiful was called *technē*. The *poiēsis* of the fine arts was called *technē*" (1977: 315). Heidegger emphasises (and by reading the ancient Greeks) that *technē* was at the core of "art", of *poiēsis*: "art was simply called *technē*. It was a single, manifold revealing" (Heidegger 1977: 316). The equation, for Heidegger, is beauty + truth = art = *technē* + *poiēsis*. (I should note that what Ra calls "immeasurable equations" are not collapses of difference: the "single" revealing, for Heidegger, is nonetheless "manifold": an equation differentiates its equated terms.) To carry through on the above argument, any politics or philosophy that would seek to obliterate technological objects would at the same time destroy (the beauty and truth of) art. And vice-versa. The line between the two is constitutively undecidable precisely because of their constitutive reciprocity that balances the equation. But why would destroying art be disadvantageous? We are approaching the reason. Today, suggests Heidegger, the revealings of *technē* and *poiēsis* are differentiated yet similar, different enough that for an "essential reflection upon technology and decisive confrontation with it" to take place,

it must happen in a realm that is, on the one hand, akin to the essence of technology and, on the other, fundamentally different from it.

Such a realm is art. But certainly only if art for its part, does not shut its eyes to the constellation of truth concerning which we are *questioning* (Heidegger 1977: 317).

Heidegger's equation proceeds from a melancholic thesis in which Western metaphysics has

20. This "revealing" is, in Heidegger, bound up with a schema of "truth" and "essence". But the metaphysical import of such words (as signifying *pure* presence or the *absolute* truth) should, at the moment, be set aside, precisely because, during the questioning, Heidegger demonstrates a process that defers any substantive account of "truth" or "essence" in-itself other than its perpetually hidden character. While this hiddenness has led to charges of mysticism or, on Derrida's behalf, of perpetuating metaphysical ontotheology in his "gathering" of "spirit" (1991), Heidegger's general schema of deploying a metaphysical language while deferring it is more subtle than at first glance.

progressively forgotten Being:²¹ the equation has become unbalanced, and the unified but manifold revealing (or, immeasurable addition) of *poiēsis* and *technē* has been split into a division. But the more germane lesson here — which I believe can be selectively sampled, or excised, from Heidegger’s romanticism for the “supreme height of the revealing” of Greece (1977: 315) — is that art *constitutively* engages with a questioning of technology, a questioning suspended between its difference from technology and its affiliation with it, just as technology is akin yet different to art, and just as technology is constitutively called into its question *through* the production of art. For Heidegger, this “truth” is expressed through a few lines of (oft-sampled) Hölderlin:

But where danger is, grows
 The saving power also . . .
 — Hölderlin, (in Heidegger 1977: 316)

Heidegger reads in the above lines that it is through technology/art that one confronts their “essence”. It is through the “dangerous” aspects of technology — its placing into “standing-reserve” of the world and its others, its equation of all into use-value, as a means and not ends, its objectification, militarisation, and non-human realm of technicity that produces itself for the sake of itself — that one

21. Thus Heidegger’s agenda, in the *Introduction to Metaphysics*, to “restore the historical Dasein of human beings — and this is also always means our ownmost future Dasein, in the whole of history that is allotted to us — back to the power of Being that is to be opened up originally” (2000: 44 [32]). But *whose* future is this elaborated in the “ownmost” of the “us”? Though Heidegger says such a task is to be taken up “only within the limits of philosophy’s capability”, this purview apparently includes nationalist geopolitics, in which “this Europe [as in, Nazi Germany circa 1935], in its unholy blindness always on the point of cutting its own throat, lies today in the great pincers between Russia on the one side and America on the other. Russia and America, seen metaphysically, are both the same: the same hopeless frenzy of unchained technology and of the rootless organization of the average man” (2000: 40 [29]). What Heidegger fails to *question* is how *rooting* the “average man” (in the white mythology of racial superiority, but also in the orgiastic celebration of technologies of death) results in a technological frenzy in which “this Europe” *did* cut its own throat — but not before slaughtering millions of others, and precisely through a more insidious technology, a “hidden” technology that Heidegger *failed to detect*, the *technology of race* that rendered entire populations “subhuman”: the Jews, but also the disabled, the non-heterosexual, and the politically opposed, and in general, any such body marked unAryan. It should be clear that I disagree with Julian Young’s assessment of Heidegger, in *Heidegger, Philosophy, Nazism* (1997), as a critic of race: as Paul Gilroy writes, “Young introduces a definition of racism so restrictive and narrowly biological in character that it forces a large wedge between volkism, nationalism, and the scientific errors he regards as racism proper” (2004: 73). In short Young, as Heidegger, fail to “delve into modernity’s cultural and metaphysical forms of race-thinking” (Gilroy 2004: 73). Or rather, questioning/ thinking the *technological art* of race.

will encounter the “saving power”. This “saving power” is not, in the strict sense, salvatory: it does not befall technology from without, from on high, but is constitutive to its essence, a differentiated part of its manifold revealing that has become occluded (for Heidegger) over the centuries: *poiēsis*. But what is this “essence”? Heidegger’s second point above is that while art and technology are constitutively constructed, which is to say, reciprocally constituted thanks to their shared Greek origin, such an “affiliation” does not guarantee that labouring with either will “reveal” something of their “true essence”. Both must remain attentive to a “questioning”. I would like to remove the term “essence”, at this point, and think the problematic in the framework of Afrofuturism. In particular, I would like to shift the problem towards an encounter of Afrofuturist alter-becomings that unEarth — which is to imply, *question* — the “technology” of the human: “race”.

What is the distinction, then, between the *what* of Heidegger’s meditation — art/technology — and the implied frame of reference, its *who*?²² For though Heidegger demonstrates the constitutive complicity of art and technology, what Sun Ra questions, I contend, is the construct of difference that adjudicates the *what* from the *who*, subject from object, human from slave, in the Alter-Destiny of an Alter-Self. This questioning takes place by unEarthing the *technologies* of “race” that exclude some selves from others. What is an “unEarthing”? So far the word has served metaphorical duty while signifying its exoterrac abandonment of the Earthly. Below, I will turn to a closer reading of the unEarthly in the unhomely and the uncanny (*unheimlich*).

Let us traverse the void, then, between Heidegger’s reflections, Stiegler’s *questioning* of technics that unfolds the technological art(ifice) of the “human”, and the thinking-through of the Alter-Self

22. Regardless as to whether it is thought as *Dasein*, and the difference Heidegger intimates yet everywhere transgresses between *Dasein* and the “human subject”, the traversal at stake is between the *who* and the *what*.

undertaken by Ra.

I would now like to turn back to Stiegler, and introduce a fragment of media theorist Friedrich Kittler. We may summarise Stiegler and Ra above as saying, in part, that the invention of the “Alter-Self” — its becoming (alien) — operates through the coordinates of a technicity (“art”) bound with memory (mnemotechnics) and time (supplementarity). The plane upon which this becoming takes place is that of a medium: a technological phylum, but also a plane(t), the word-technics, or MythScience, of a worlding. But there is a third meaning of medium, its occult, mystic, or magical inflection, one inferred by Geerken when he writes that “just one glimpse into the poetic world of Sun Ra is enough to confirm that we are dealing with a unique mediumistic talent” (2005: xix). It is at this point that Geerken introduces Ra’s “magic of words”. It is the magic of the medium that Kittler, too, is concerned with:

A medium is a medium is a medium. As the sentence says, there is no difference between occult and technological media. Their truth is fatality, their field the unconscious. And because the unconscious never finds an illusory belief, the unconscious can only be stored (Kittler 1990: 229).

Kittler, here, will draw us into an occult thinking of the medium, of the complicity between “medium” as substrate to a “spiritual medium”, the latter that translates between matter and the spirit(s) of the unconscious: that, in short, traverses the divide of the *who* to the *what*. Kittler adds another dimension to our discussion, though one already at work in Ra’s “magic of words” and Stiegler’s mnemotechnics. Kittler’s occult media signifies, embedded within technology-arts, the “spirit” of the unconscious. Kittler draws attention to the magic, mystic, occult, or *mythic* dimension to mnemotechnics. What Kittler calls technological media — the mediums of meaning-making, of

recording, of writing, inscription and memory, of mnemotechnics in general — are occult media: they inscribe the (collective) unconscious. Occult media, which is to say, mnemotechnics or tertiary memory, which is to say again, *technology in general*, hovers in-between the subject and the object, the *what* and the *who*, precisely because the latter is a constitutive effect of the former. It is supplementary: the *who* follows from the *what* as that which is added on later to begin with. It is this supplementarity of the human self, in which technological repositories of tertiary memory construct the *who-that-I-am* that will have constructed, or invented, occult media, that renders the effects of encountering the latter, as the *myself that I am* (not), uncanny, unhomely, or unEarthly — the *unheimlich*. The reason for this is *because* of the mnemotechnics of technological media that inscribes the unconscious. To reiterate: technological media are not just exteriorised technological objects, external to an internalised unconscious contained “within” the “mind” (wheresoever that mind is situated, or at a remove from, the body — hence Kittler’s strategic and occult use of “spirit”), but are constitutive *of* the memory functions of mind (the invention of the human in general). The unconscious is everywhere around us and it is technological. It is exteriorised as the condition of the interiority of the self. The unconscious is everywhere imprinted in mnemotechnical objects, in tertiary forms of memory. Technology, like us but not like us, making us up yet different from our make-up, effects itself upon us as uncanny. It is occult media: technological objects are the mediums of unknown memory (the “unconscious”, the occult media of the “spirit”).

Kittler’s occult media ties into an aspect of concepttechnics. This tying begins with the shared premise that technological objects contain concepts: “concepttechnics” signals the constitutive relationship. But it also signals its uncanniness. Concepttechnics, in its signifier, admixtures concept<>technics,

dismantling into coterminous becoming the thought of a mind (*who*) and the medium of the *what* (technics). Yet their overlap in the signifier (“concepttechnics”) signals the undecidability of the *who* to the *what* and their coterminous relation. Occult media and concepttechnics also share the following observation: that interacting with technological objects is not just a “usage” of a technology, but shifts the constructed and porous boundary of the *who* to the *what*, between one’s self and a (technological) object — keeping in mind that this boundary is an *effect* of concepttechnics, i.e., of uncanny tertiary memory producing the unconscious interiority of mind.

There is also a historical argument to be made here. Kittler writes that it is the typewriter that “designates the turning point at which communications technologies can no longer be related back to humans” (1999: 229). For Kittler, it is the typewriter that distances the human subject from the imprint of hand-writing.²³ Stiegler, however, argues that the industrialisation of technics in the 18th century is the turning point at which the technical object engenders its auto-genesis, from which “one may refer to the *autonomy* of the machine — the autonomy of its *genesis*” (1998: 68). It is from this historical point, suggests Stiegler, that machines generate themselves. The auto-generation of technologies is what Stiegler calls “*industrial*” technicity, “*available independently of all territorial considerations*” (Stiegler 1998: 70).

But surely there is a more significant genealogical moment, a moment in which the discourse of the *who* is subhumanised into the *what*: that of the industrial abduction, transposition, and reproduction of

23. Kittler notes this difference from Heidegger in the latter’s 1942/3 essay on the hand and the typewriter, in which Heidegger ruminates upon how “no animal has a hand”, thus establishing that “Man does not ‘have’ hands, but the hand holds the essence of man, because the word as the essential realm of the hand is the ground of the essence of man” (Heidegger, in Kittler 1999: 198). The typewriter, however “is a signless cloud, i.e., a withdrawing concealment in the midst of its very obtrusiveness, and through it the relation to Being to man is transformed” (Heidegger, in Kittler 1999: 199). I highlight the word “transformed”. Designed unhumans seek precisely such a transformation through unEarthly technics. I also note here that I write on various laptops, but also by hand. I have been transformed. As have the rest of us: this entire dissertation is, indeed, stored in the cloud.

the slave. While both Stiegler and Kittler proffer machinic moments of technological distantiation in which machines replicate themselves, or replicate characteristics considered to be human, the general form of this movement takes place centuries prior with the production of what the term “robot” allegorises: *slave*. It is the slave that fundamentality disturbs the distinction between the *who/what*, and demonstrates the invention of the human and its unhumanist other as coterminous to the discourse and philosophy of modernity and the Enlightenment.

The general condition of technico-autogenesis is of the iterability, or constitutive repetition, of technicity. But before I turn to this, I would like to point out, here, how the dissemination of Afrofuturist becomings is entwined with industrial technicity. Of course, all dissemination relies upon industrial technicity: this is Stiegler’s point, which is to explicate a thought of Derrida’s left hanging at the end of “Signature Event Context” (SEC). At the close to SEC, Derrida draws a distinction between the common thought of “communication”, as “transference of meaning, the exchange of intentions and meanings [*vouloir-dire*], discourse and the ‘communication of consciousness’”, a thought that would encompass the “narrow” concept of writing, and its *myths* of immediacy, transparency, and self-consciousness, and contrasts it to the “increasingly powerful historical expansion of a general writing, of which the system of speech, consciousness, meaning, presence, truth, etc., would be only an effect, and should be analyzed as such” (2000: 20). In short, the transparency of communication, as all such transparencies of one present to another, is a “fantasy in the real sense”, the myth of reality, and but an effect of a “fantasy in the false sense”, the “powerful historical expansion of a general writing”.

The latter, the expansion of a general writing, is “powerful” because of its intensification, an “expansion” of the autoreplication of technics into industrial technicity: machines that make themselves.

This short sentence at the end of SEC suggesting the “powerful expansion of a general writing” is, I would like to propose, Derrida’s encapsulated reading of Heidegger’s “The Question Concerning Technology”, a point drawn out in the work of Derrida’s uncanny double, Stiegler.²⁴ I will not have the time to further explicate this point, save to note that, by a “general writing”, we read the graphematic structure, *arkhe*-writing, which is everywhere *historicised* as the *grammè*, which is to say, in the language that seeks to retrieve the origin, “of the machine, of the *technè*” (Derrida 1997: 84–85).²⁵

It is necessary, then, to rethink the historical elaboration of technicity from the side of the enslaved *what*. Afrofuturist becomings destabilise the relationship of the *who* to the *what* from a *historical positioning* in which enslaved bodies have been disenfranchised from the privileged site of the *who/human*. Afrofuturist becomings thus engage technological whatness strategically. They are disseminated through their representation, i.e., the production of televisual images or other forms of “communications media”, in which the globalisation of industrial technicity consists of a “general writing” in which *technicity disseminates itself and replicates itself*. Technologies (re)produce themselves: but so do those technologies of *race*, or those racialised, in directions that both perpetuate the technology of race as well as counter it. The trajectory of technico-replicants — the uncanny and occult media of which we are but the *effect* of a destabilisation between the *who* and the *what* engendered by the “historical expansion of a general writing” — has powerfully intensified.²⁶ Hence, both the

24. I do not have the time or space here to *justify* this claim, though this entire section could be read as demonstrating it. I leave it as a mark of Derrida’s attentiveness to the late Heidegger, one that has influenced the shape of his thought (and unthought) around technicity and *différance*.

25. This point is made in *Of Grammatology*, in which “the unity of man and the human adventure” is “a stage or an articulation in the history of life — of what I have called *différance* — as the history of the *grammè*” (Derrida 1997: 84). It is underscored by Stiegler (1998).

26. I am reminded here by a thoroughly dangerous yet unsexy foe in *Stargate: SG-1*, the TV series: the Replicants. The Replicants, invented by an android as toys, are programmed to protect themselves and their creator. Unfortunately, they go berserk doing so: able to recombine (like Lego) into large machines and operating solely through flocking-behaviours of swarming-intelligence based upon the above two laws — and a need to incorporate, as in ingest, newer technologies and technological substrates (materials) — they nearly threaten all life in not one but two galaxies. The Earthly response is unintentionally effective, as the inferior technology of Earthlings (projectile weapons, inferior spaceships) gives the SG-1 team a strange advantage, as they are not targets (unlike the far more advanced, and

persistence of enslavement and ethnocultural racism on the one hand, and the offworlding and unEarthing of Afrofuturism, on the other.

With its powerful expansion, is it any wonder that forms of the uncanny have proliferated? That unhuman uncanniness has intensified? That unEarthly becomings are “powerfully expanding” alike?

Three points, then:

1. That the invention of the modern slave, as the first modern “subject”, and as the condition of possibility for the birth of the hue-man, signals a shift in the boundaries of the *who* to the *what*, which is to say, this shift is bound up with the “effects” (that are also “conditions”) of an industrial technicity, of the historical expansion of Hölderlin’s “dangerous power” in which Heidegger reads “technology”;

2. That Afrofuturist becomings, rather than attempting to resurrect, or defend, the above historical split between the *who* and the *what* that privileged some “humans” while excluding (the) others, which is to say, rather than attempting to salvage, or return to, the *myth* of consciousness, of transparent communication of the self to itself in self-consciousness — the myth of the *who* known as the “human” — have, at the limit, undertaken a trajectory otherwise, in the traversal of the *what(who)*, by intensifying unEarthly, uncanny, and unhumanist becomings, in an exodus, or abandonment, of the myth of the human (the latter which is but an *effect* of autoreplicating technicity);

3. And that the production of technological/occult media — recording mediums, graffiti, and other objects of tertiary memory — disturb the *who/what* distinction and are capable of strategically catalysing alter-becomings. Afrofuturist musical forms²⁷ — such as Sun Ra’s outerspace jazz, RZA’s

helpful little green alien clones, the Asgard). The Replicants take an uncanny turn when they recombine themselves into humanoids with emotional characteristics — and, when capturing SG-1 members, begin probing their unconscious minds. The revenge of tertiary memory.

27. And many others; becoming is, of course, not limited to Afrofuturism. It is, however, my focus here, as it entwines with the figure of the slave and its “essential” relation to the “human”.

Shaolin hip-hop, or the androidal (im)perfectionism of Cindi Mayweather's Afrofuturefunk — disseminate such becomings, their sonic affects engendering transformations upon the "self". Afrofuturist becomings are encoded in the *unconscious* effects of occult media.

Let us return, then, to the fundamental thesis: that "the former [technologies] have formed the latter [humans]" (Kittler 1999: 229).

With these reflections, we are beginning to return to orbit around Sun Ra's planet — where a convergent, yet different, thesis is to be found, a thesis that thinks the artificial origin of man, of memory, and of technicity: "What is called man when first created", writes Ra, "was given an invented memory" (2005a: 60). Note that, for Ra, who is not a "man", but an alien, "man" is already suspended between the *what* and the *who* — an invention, or "creation", akin to an android. "Man" is "given" an "invented memory". Not memory itself, but an invention thereof. Man is programmed to be Man. I will return to this thought. First we need to prepare the ground. Or rather, unground it — into space.

The Location of Outer Space

This is a familiar manoeuvre of theoretical knowledge, where, having opened up the chasm of cultural difference, a mediator or metaphor of otherness must be found to contain the effects of difference. In order to be institutionally effective as a discipline, the knowledge of cultural difference must be made to foreclose on the Other; difference and otherness must become the fantasy of a certain cultural space, or, indeed, the certainty of a form of theoretical knowledge that deconstructs the epistemological "edge" of the West (Bhabha 1994: 45-46).²⁸

28. As it does in Deleuze and Guattari, whose *A Thousand Plateaus* is intersected by the Orientalist location of culture. For example, in the plateau on Becoming: "Among types of civilizations, the Orient has many more individuations by haecceity than by subjectivity or substantiality" (2000: 261).

Inescapable, perhaps, is the institutional demand, in which I have replicated a “familiar manoeuvre of theoretical knowledge”. The metaphors of otherness, however, arise from Afrofuturist texts. They signal not just otherness, but the “other otherness”, in which I recite after Ra: “an other otherness / That is not like to or of / Their themness” (1980, version 2, Ra 2005a: 119). An otherness different than the two combined, an otherness to them: a third space, what I will approach below, through Ra, as an equation of the third E(a)rth (erth = thre(e)).

I turn to Bhabha here to seek some space. Bhabha seeks a space, a “Third Space”, in which to avoid containing the effects of difference by reducing the other to “metaphor”. A third space where “all cultural statements and systems are constructed in this contradictory and ambivalent space of enunciation”,

that Third Space, though unrepresentable in itself, which constitutes the discursive conditions of enunciation that ensure that the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity; that even the same signs can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricized and read anew (Bhabha 1994: 55).

This Third Space is the strategic space of this entire thesis, but it is here, in a supplementary fashion, that I strategically enunciate it — ritually incant it — for the *minor* encounter between Heidegger and Ra.²⁹

It is something of this Third Space — or rather the Outer Space Inner, to rephrase Sun Ra — that will be the *modus operandi* for the encounter. Yet how can the institution meet the demands of an-other text? Perhaps in the words of Malcolm X, “by any means necessary”:³⁰ the exoterrac affects of

29. Minor, because this encounter will undoubtedly not live up to royal expectations: we are but dealing with the closing section to a chapter that, before the Inconclusive, ends this thesis as a whole (but with a “black hole” of “absolute density” — Fanon).

30. Short of abandoning the institution entirely.

Afrofuturist other-otherness will be interpolated by the only means possible within the context of a disciplinary text: “the Other is cited, quoted, framed, illuminated”, writes Bhabha (1994: 46). Out of necessity. The challenge, then, is to dislocate the alterity of Afrofuturism, and Sun Ra, from being “encased in the shot/reverse-shot strategy of serial enlightenment” and from “its *location* as the closure of grand theories” (Bhabha 1994: 46).³¹

Which is precisely where Ra will be, at the closure to a “grand theory” — but this location, take note, will not be on Earth.

What follows will strive to develop a conceptual encounter, in which “Sun Ra” emerges as “*something else besides*” to the above discussion between Stiegler, Heidegger, and Derrida (Bhabha 1994: 41).

To reconstruct a few sentences of Bhabha pertinent for thinking “Third Space”: Afrofuturism is simply “not there in some primordial, naturalistic sense”; it only makes “sense as [it] come[s] to be constructed” (1994: 38). This is its constitutive problematic of retroactive construction. It is artifice, a myth, a counterreality, constructed in a negotiation with textual matters that reflect precisely upon the fantasies of artifice, myth, and reality.

This is also to specifically *locate* the question of the (Eurocentric) philosophical texts and their position here, which is not at the foreclosure of meaning, but rather, as one side of a call-and-response, in which can imagine Heidegger being hailed on the street, where the interpellating figure is not the cop (who of course would be but the “average man” of metaphysics), but Sun Ra — beaming in from his sonic spaceship, in Kemetic robes, accompanied on one side by Thoth, the god of writing and death, the

31. The very format of this undertaking ensures a constitutive failure, in this regard. Conclusions must be drawn. Should Afrofuturism not have the last words?

other, Horus, god of the sun.

The fantastical gesture here, and heretically so, is to entertain — against the timeline, against “reality” and, in the words of Eshun, “to crumple chronology like an empty bag of crisps” (1999: 00[-004]) — that philosophy is but the myth of Afrofuturism. Sun Ra before Heidegger. An alternative counter-tradition in which Kemet never fell; in which pyramidal technologies take flight. Imagine this counter-tradition as existing: as an invented memory, in which Greek philosophy came late, centuries after Sun Ra.

Entering the Zone of Occult Instability

Accompanying Sun Ra in his beam-in with Heidegger is Frantz Fanon. Fanon, who wears the mask of Horus, the protector (and yes: it is Derrida, the Franco-Maghrebian, wearing the mask of Thoth, of course). This masking is, of course, double: it is Horus inhabiting Fanon, who wear the mask of Thoth, as does Derrida — but I digress. The scene is no act: it can be seen in *Space Is the Place* (1974), when Ra is driving through town, upon arrival in his sonic spaceship. Look for the masks. Ra is in a classic 1930s Packard convertible, flanked on either side.³²

I turn briefly to Fanon because of his use of poetry in *Black Skin, White Masks* to illustrate, where his analysis cannot, where his *words* cannot, the affective impact, and force, of colonialist worlding. I do not mean to flatten Ra’s texts to similar conditions. But Fanon’s use of the phrase “zone of occult instability” appears particularly resonant, here, as Fanon seeks to describe with this phrase the zone in which anticolonial imaginaries — which is to say, creative labours to produce other worlds / words — are

32. Precise time: at 41:33. Ra has just shaken hands on a deal for distribution rights to his music. On Earth, he needs to bow to the privatised system of dissemination.

energised.

Fanon memorably phrases “*le liere de déséquilibre occulte*” in *The Wretched of the Earth* [1961] (2004). I will read this passage for its alter-meanings, seeking an exoterrac thinking. We must begin reading all of its signs otherwise: alienation as Alien Nation; the “other side” as not just that of the coloniser, but as that which is alien, *or if already becoming alien* (as in the case of Sun Ra), *of that which is other-Earthly*, the “other otherness”. I have re-created the passage, italics my own:

We cannot go resolutely forward unless we first realize our *Alien Nation*. We have taken everything from the *other side*. . . . We must rather reunite with [the colonized intellectuals and artists: but here, *Afrofuturists*] in their recent counter move which will suddenly call everything into question; we must focus on that *zone of occult instability* in which the people *dwell* [to be *unEarthed*], for let there be no mistake, it is here that their souls [*occult media spirits*] are crystallized, and their perception and respiration transfigured (Fanon 2004: 163).³³

Where do the Afrofuturist people “dwell”? The question is Heideggerrean. But asking it will unEarth Heidegger.

Peopling without People. First caveat to the above Afrofuturist reading of Fanon: that there is no such “people.” There are Afrofuturist signs everywhere produced, but no unified culture, no body of people bound by convention and certainly not by territory.³⁴ But there is a shared sense of diasporic *belonging*: this belonging takes place in the collective abandonment of the human.

Dwelling in The Supreme Uncanny: Earth is Three. Second, if there is an Afrofuturist “dwelling”, it dwells in unEarthly unhomeliness. It is off-world. Is such an unEarthing a dwelling?

33. I have here modified Philcox’s new translation (where he writes “that zone of hidden fluctuation”) to resample “zone of occult instability” from Constance Farrington, who had it better to begin with.

34. As Bhabha writes of proletarianisation in general, “*there is no given community or body of the people whose inherent, radical historicity emits the right signs*” (1994: 39).

There is nothing particular to the unhomeliness of human dwelling; it is the existential condition that Heidegger locates as germinal to all uncanny humanity.

Let us here turn to Heidegger's 1942 lecture, "Hölderlin's Hymn 'The Ister'" (1996). Heidegger's purpose, in this text, is to read Hölderlin's poem, "The Ister".³⁵ There are, of course, more flows than possible to contain in Heidegger's line-by-line reading of Hölderlin's "hymn". But I will turn to, first, the river, as the "locality of human abode", in which, says Hölderlin, "Here, however, we wish to build" (1. 15), which Heidegger, at first, reads as "the river determines the dwelling place of human beings upon the earth" (Heidegger 1996: 20).

Of course, one cannot build upon a river. One can bridge across it, but not upon it. What does Hölderlin mean? Heidegger will dive deeper into this phrase, to think *dwelling* and the flow of the river. But it is the river, as that site of flow and movement and ungroundingness — a metaphor for the passage of time, in which the cliché dwells, "you cannot step into the same river twice" — that, says Heidegger

pervades the abode of human beings upon the earth, determines them to where they belong, and where they are *homely* [*heimisch*]. The river thus brings *human beings* into their own and maintains them in what is their own. Whatever is their own is that to which human beings *belong* and *must belong* if they are to fulfill whatever is *destined* to them, and whatever is fitting, as their specific way of being. Yet that which is their own often remains *foreign* to human beings for a long time, because they *abandon* it without having *appropriated* it. And human beings *abandon* what is their own because it is what most threatens to overwhelm them (my italics, Heidegger 1996: 21).

I will suggest, in the interests of expediency, that the citation above is the "essence" of Heidegger's

35. The Ister, otherwise known as the Danube, is the second-longest river in Central Europe (after the Volga), and flows some 2,860 km from Breg to the Black Sea. It is also the real yet metaphysical waterway for the philosophical film *The Ister* (2004) that discusses aspects of Heidegger's 1942 lecture course and includes interviews with Bernard Stiegler, Jean-Luc Nancy, and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, among others.

thesis. The river is the unhomely: in its manifold flowing, it is the ungroundingness upon which humans dwell. Yet — and it is the *yet* I am concerned with — Heidegger issues an injunction: human beings *must* appropriate what is their “own” (the river), *gather* its manifold unhomeliness (another word I will turn to), so as to *belong*, so as to fit or fulfill their *destiny*. Such is the first injunction. The second is *not to abandon the foreign*. Or rather, not to abandon the *other* without first *appropriating* the other. Human beings all too easily abandon the other because it “threatens to overwhelm them”. Human being must, says Heidegger, “appropriate” the foreign: bring it into what is their “own”, for it is the other that, like the river, is most their own.

I have italicised a small inventory of the terms above. They are also signifiers that have been disseminated throughout this thesis — belonging, abandonment, human being, foreign — but with trajectories and inflections near opposite to that of Heidegger’s. I say “opposite”, but the improper word would be: offworld.

Where Heidegger wants to appropriate the other into the own, Sun Ra will want to exappropriate the other into the other otherness. Where Heidegger will want to dwell upon the Earth, in gathering the unhomeliness of human being into homeliness, Sun Ra will want to build sonic spaceships, abandoning Earth in an exploration of the outer darkness.

Yet, there is an “essential ambiguity” to both positions in which both, unhomely so, dwell.

These are the primary theses at stake. Let us return to the text. Heidegger, in the midst of reading Hölderlin, will turn to Sophocles’ *Antigone*. Antigone is the daughter of Oedipus and his incestuous coupling with his own mother, Jocasta. Antigone is expelled from Thebes for performing funeral rites for her brother, Polynices, against the will of Creon, her uncle and King. Brought before Creon,

Antigone strikes down Creon's law, eloquently stating that divine law overrules it. Antigone is interned alive for her punishment, and entombed outside the city, hangs herself. Her brother, Haimon, commits suicide after discovering her body.

Heidegger turns to *Antigone* in a meditation on what it means to be homely. He does so, in part, because of Hölderlin's reflections upon *Antigone*;³⁶ thus Heidegger turns to Hölderlin's remarks to assist in deciphering *The Ister*. Heidegger finds, in this meditation, and also reading Plato's *Phaedrus*, that "the hearth [*oikos*], the homestead of the homely, is being itself, in whose light and radiance, glow and warmth, all beings have in each case already gathered" (1996: 114). The hearth is the gathering of being: it is the cosy warmth of what is ownmost to human beings.

But Antigone is expelled from home and hearth. And Heidegger reads this expulsion from home, from the hearth, as *constitutive* of human being. It is here that the *unhomely* becomes ambiguous. To return to Hölderlin, unhomeliness is constitutive because human being seeks to dwell — which is to say, built the hearth upon — the moving flow of the river. There are two movements here in Heidegger: an ambiguity of trajectories that Heidegger recognises within his own text.

On the one hand, Heidegger will emphasise the need for a return to the hearth [*oikos*], a return that can only be undertaken if one "appropriates" the inner unhomeliness to human being. What is foreign or other to the human being in its ownmost is its unhomeliness. This must be appropriated to return to the hearth of being. Reading the choral ode to *Antigone*, Heidegger writes of how "this expulsion from the sphere of the hearth [Antigone's expulsion from Thebes] merely impels us to be attentive to the homely and to risk belonging to it" (1996: 115). Human being *risks* belonging to the homely — the

36. In *Remarks on Antigone* [*Anmerkungen zur Antigone*], in English as *Hölderlin's Sophocles: Oedipus and Antigone*, trans. David Constantine, Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe, 2001.

hearth of being — only by first risking an encounter with *unhomeliness*: thus, “it is precisely this being unhomely that Antigone takes upon herself” (1996: 115). She undertakes the “supreme action” in this moment: suffering.

But it is here that being unhomely becomes ambiguous. Essentially so. For on the other hand, writes Heidegger,

In becoming homely, being unhomely is first accomplished. And this not merely in the sense that, in becoming homely, being unhomely finds its conclusion; rather, Antigone’s becoming homely first brings to light the essence of being unhomely. Becoming homely makes manifest the essential ambiguity of being unhomely (Heidegger 1996: 115).

This ambiguity, however, is to one side of the becoming: it is solely on the side of being unhomely. The ambiguity *only* arises in becoming homely.

What would it mean, then, to *become unhomely*? Let us briefly reserve this question. For what is it that constrains the ambiguity solely to being homely? Why isn’t there an ambiguity to becoming homely, as well?

I address this latter question by turning to what Heidegger reads as the “inner essence of *being properly* unhomely” (1996: 115). “In Antigone’s taking such being unhomely into her own essence”, writes Heidegger, “she is ‘properly’ unhomely” (1996: 117). The sign of the “proper” — of appropriation — plays a decisive role for Heidegger in his injunction that human beings become homely. There are proper sorts of unhomeliness for doing so. The proper sort of being unhomely returns human being to the hearth: “being unhomely can also rupture such forgottenness [of the hearth, *oikos*] through ‘thoughtful remembrance’ [“*Andenken*”] of being and through a belonging to the hearth”

(1996: 115).

To stray beyond the proper is a question not just of decision but of “distinguishing” the proper: there is a “risk of distinguishing and deciding between that being unhomely proper to human beings and a being unhomely that is inappropriate” (1996: 117). For Heidegger, the inappropriate being unhomely alien-ates human being from the hearth of being. Hence the *risk* of decision: apparently, appearances can be deceiving, the inappropriate cannot always be distinguished from the appropriate. The appropriate choice, for Antigone, is that of *suffering*. “Her suffering the δεινόν is her supreme action”, writes Heidegger (1996: 115): suffering the δεινόν is the proper being unhomely that returns her to becoming homeliness. Or in her words, παθεῖν τὸ δεινόν τοῦτο, which Heidegger translates as “passing through this being unhomely amid all beings” (1996: 117). Or more literally, Antigone suffers (*pathein*) by passing through the moment of wonder and terror (*deinon*).

But this is not a comprehensive translation. We need to briefly turn to the *Introduction to Metaphysics* to think δεινόν.³⁷ Here, Heidegger also considers the choral ode of *Antigone*, the opening line which reads: *polla ta deina kouden anthropon deinoteron pelei*. Heidegger translates it as (or rather, it has been translated again into English as): “Manifold is the uncanny [*deina: Unheimliche*], yet nothing / uncannier [*deinoteron: Unheimlichkeit*] than man bestirs itself, rising up beyond him” (2000: 156).

It is here that we need to re-read each instance of the above *unhomely* as *uncanny: Unheimliche*. “The human being is”, Heidegger writes, “in *one* word, *to deinotaton*, the uncanniest. This saying about humanity grasps it from the most extreme limits and the most abrupt abysses of its Being” (2000: 159). But this one word means several: awe, wonder, terror, cleverness. It is, one word, the descriptor for the

37. I am indebted to Thomas A. Davis’ essay “The Deinon of Yielding at the End of Metaphysics” (1990) for drawing my attention to this passage.

exoterracist. It is, one word, the descriptor of becoming-alien, android, or machinic. “The Greek word *deinon*”, writes Heidegger, “has that uncanny ambiguity with which the saying of the Greeks traverses the opposed con-frontations of Being” (2000: 159).

It is just such a con-frontation traversed here, a traversal of the constitutive uncanniness of the being unhomely that, according to Heidegger, *must* be appropriated into becoming homely. Antigone, for Heidegger, “is the most uncanny in the supreme manner, namely in such a way that she takes it upon her in its full essence, in taking it upon herself to become homely within being” (1996: 117). But what does this effectively mean? It means risking all: death. Expulsion from the home itself. But this death would be the proper becoming homely, the “appropriate” return to the hearth.

The constitutive ambiguity to “being unhomely”, then, is its risk of a *catastrophe* — which is to say, death. But what of an inappropriate becoming homely? It would need not take the shape of death. As Geerken notes, Sun Ra refused to acknowledge death, inappropriately exclaiming “Give up your death!” (2005: xxiv). There is another impossibility, then, that emerges, and an inappropriate one: the *decisive*, utter abandonment of the hearth and home. Of being, then, itself. This returns us to the unanswered question posed above: what if one “decides” to embrace the “inappropriate being unhomely”? Embraces the risk? Call the bluff on being? What then?

Would this not “be” the most uncanny act? In *Introduction to Metaphysics*, still reading the *δαινόν*, Heidegger writes that

the uncanniest (the human being) is what is because from the ground up it deals with and conserves the familiar [homely; hearth; *oikos*] only in order to break out of it and to let what overwhelms it break in. Being itself throws humanity into the course of this tearing-away, which

forces humanity beyond itself, as the one who moves out to Being, in order to set Being to work and thus to hold open beings as as a whole (Heidegger 2000: 174).

But what if one is excluded from “humanity” to begin with? What if the position of the most uncanniest of the uncanny is not *grounded* from *oikos*, from the hearth of Being, but from *tekhne*, from the side of the *what*: from the side of the labouring machine, living outside the Big House of Being? Antigone, as a woman, already ex-habits such an exclusion from the privileged human; her status as a woman is not on par with that of her male relatives. Of course, her place is doubly bound to the hearth because of it, and her uncanny figure all the more transgressive insofar as she seeks to obey divine law — that of the sun — over that of Creon’s patriarchal authority.

“The *deinotaton* of the *deinon*, the uncanniest of the uncanny, lies in the oppositional relation of *dikē* and *technē*”, writes Heidegger (2000: 173). We have already read above something of the “essence” of *technē* as nothing technological — but as conjoined with, historically at the moment in which Heidegger is reading Sophocle’s *Antigone*, *poiēsis*. *Dikē*, normally translated as “justice” or “norm”, is translated by Heidegger as fittingness (*Fug*). Fittingness is “joint and structure”: it is arrangement, the “enjoining structure, which compels fitting-in and compliance”; thus it follows from *logos*, “originary gatheredness” (Heidegger 2000: 171). Or, to translate the above, again: *concepttechnics* is constitutive to the uncanny in its opposition with structure. Concepttechnics propels the uncanny outward bound; structure reigns it in, to *fit* in, back at the hearth of Being.

Unless, that is, the uncanny one is expelled to begin with — or later, in which case, one can suffer, undergo the *παθεῖν τὸ δεινὸν τοῦτο*, and properly embrace death (honourably). This latter and most appropriate becoming homely would be the “supreme action”, for Heidegger.

But there are other meanings for the “supreme”: the Supreme Mathematics and the Supreme Alphabet. John Coltrane’s “A Love Supreme” [1964]. In which there is no suffering, but joy, love, elevation.

To summarise one thread of argument: “the invention of the human” is uncanny, and constitutively unhomely, as it contaminates the opposition of concepttechnics to structure (*Dikē*), of the tearing-apart between the creative urge to produce “extensions out” (Ra, in Hauff 1994) — or to conform (*dikē*) back into being, to gather (*logos*) back to the hearth (*oikos*) of Being.³⁸

Sun Ra is on the side of extensions out. The opposition may seem too simplistic: Heidegger has his ambiguities. But the injunction above is clear. The human being must properly appropriate back into its own. It must gather the foreign and return it to the hearth, and moreover, ownmost it. Ra would have it another way: Ra would *ground*, which is to say, *inappropriately abandon* Being to its Plane(t), recognising that humanity is *δαινόν* because of the violence wrought in dividing the manifold uncanniness of being-human from the “ground up”, a gathering (*logos*) of what is, and is not, properly human. Two gathered camps, then: those human beings, properly at home, before the hearth of Being, who have ownmosted the foreign, and overcome the uncanny, in a return to the heart. And then: the other others. Inappropriate, and uncanny, decisively becoming unhomely.³⁹

An inappropriate reading of Heidegger is required to think this question: of decisively abandoning Being, extensions out. A becoming-unhomely, or uncanny concepttechnics of the Heideggerean text

38. The phrase “extensions out” arises from Sigrid Hauff’s study of Ra’s poetry (1994), where, Ra says, “when reality reaches a certain point / Beyond that point is myth” (in Hauff 1994: 50).

39. Heidegger will recognise (a) violence, that of Creon, but will tie it to the creative act, in a manner that personifies Ra’s “despotism” in his appearance, but not his actions: “Therefore the violence-doer knows no kindness and conciliation (in the ordinary sense), no appeasement and mollification by success or prestige and by their confirmation. In all this, the violence-doer as creator sees only a seeming fulfillment, which is to be despised” (2000: 174).

through an intervention by an-other otherness. The heterogeneous interpolation of the two yielding, perhaps, a reading that is neither one nor the other, but in this case, the emergence of an Afrofuturist alter-text. This strategy, then, is that of the “sustained interruption from a source relating ‘otherwise’ (*allegorein* = speaking otherwise) to the continuous unfolding of the main system of meaning”, as Spivak says of Paul de Man’s definition of irony — which is not to be read in its caustic, cynical guise, but as *allegorein*, in which “the undeconstructible experience of the impossible” is enunciated (1999: 430).⁴⁰

At stake for Heidegger in such an inappropriation would be the risk of abandoning the hearth [*oikos*] of Being, an abandonment that he characterises as “a forgottenness of the hearth, that is, of being” (1996: 115). But what if this “forgottenness” is decisive? We might also ask: *whose* Being — *whose* historico-ontological enunciation — is being forgotten? When the proper being unhomely is *suffering*, and in the case of Antigone, *death* — a case that is synecdoche for exclusion — this question must be posed. At the very least, would a decisive forgetfulness not constitute a being unhomely that abandons the return to hearth-being in a *becoming-unhearthly*?

For this would be the decisive gesture: to abandon the hearth being. To abandon hEarth.

Rather than being-unhomely constituting but a detour or stage in the dialectical return to home and hEarth (however “essentially ambiguous”), must it not also *risk* — constitutively so, for the risk to be a *risk*, an impossibility of outcomes in which “we hold this myth [of forgetting heart-being] to be potential” (Ra 2005a: 210) — the decisive gesture of risky forgetfulness, in the movement of a

40. In her Appendix to *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason* (1999), Spivak differentiates between Derrida’s earlier emphasis on *différance* — that spacing-time which continuously differs/delays/defers the institution of origins, binaries, etc. — and the “setting to work” of *différant* (un)concepts (justice, ethics, hospitality, etc.) in Derrida’s later work (1999: 423–32). Debates over periodicity aside, I agree that *différance* necessarily implies the undeconstructible “experiences of radical alterity” (426), from which a necessary but impossible and thus aporetic relation is always the case between the unconditional (justice, hospitality, ethics, etc.) and the calculated or economic (law, politics, policy, etc.).

becoming-unhEarthly?

It is here that Sun Ra's technique of textual permutation, of what he calls a "drama on words", might be of some improper assistance (2005b: 185). I have previously traced the movements of the *r* and *l* in f(r)lesh and wor(l)d. A single displacement of the letter *H* — initial of Heidegger as synecdoche for the Eurocentricism of the Hearth-being, *qua* Western philosophy as the History of Hearth-being, of proper Homeliness, *whose Being this is*⁴¹ — accomplishes the task: becoming-unhEarthly becomes, H-removed, *becoming-unEarthly*.⁴²

The inappropriate translation I afford of the δεινόν, then, is the unEarthly.

The inappropriate translation I afford of the "uncanniest of the uncanny" (*deinotaton* of the *deinon*) is the *exoterrac* — or, the extensions out of unEarthly becoming.

Through an erasure only possible in the errancy of translation — in itself an uncanniness that renders unhomely being as the house of language — these permutations reveal their alter-meanings as ex-orbitant: *exeunt terra cognita*. They reveal the planetary assumption of the hEarth of Being, and the risk at stake: forgottenness of Earth itself, and of Earthly being. Yet this inappropriate erasure yields an accurate account of alter-becoming as being not of this Earth but of an offworld otherwise. Or, in Heidegger's terms above, the "foreign" (other) *cannot* be appropriated, precisely because the excluded other from the House of Being is the *other* otherness. The other otherness becomes the improper

41. Which is to say, this is Heidegger's enclosure of Western philosophy as a homely metaphysics.

42. In his study of black power sf, Mark Bould writes that *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* "depicts a fantastical US, an unhomely home" and that "black power sf . . . [depicts] great refusals and demands for a here-and-now home within an unhomely land" (2007: 221). Bould argues that Malcolm X's inability to imagine a future other than an enclosed ethnic enclave, the "proposed secession of larger, albeit relatively self-sufficient and hermetic ghettos" ensures that its cultural imaginary as well as its politics "remains *contained*" (221). The future effects of black nationalist segregation are ominously explored in Evie Shockley's alternate-future story "separation anxiety", which reveals how "the african american cultural conservation unit" has become yet another strategy of (increasingly) authoritarian containment (2000: 51). The critical differentiation of handling not just the unhomely territory but the unhomeliness of the subject — "the desire to find a space for blackness *within*" (Bould 2007: 221) — measures the very distance between black nationalism (and its tendencies toward a Heideggerean hearth-being of being unhomely in the becoming homely) and the improper becoming unhomeliness of Afrofuturism.

unhomeliness of the unEarthly. The other otherness does not seek to return to hEarth, but becomes unEarthly. This is the meaning of “trajectory”, or “becoming”.

The risk has been gambled, and the stakes are high: the h/Earth itself.

Sun Ra is aware of this gamble in an improper becoming unEarthly that would abandon the hEarth. This very same gamble occupies the central narrative of the Sun Ra film *Space is the Place* (1974). In an occult card game with the Overseer, Sun Ra plays for the fate of Earth itself. Ra attempts to save Earth’s inhabitants by offering them offworld employment with Outer Spaceways Incorporated, but seeing that the position provides no pay and requires giving up Earthly pleasures and vices, only a handful take him up on the offer.⁴³ At the end of the film, Ra survives an on-stage assassination attempt by government agents and trumps the Overseer. The Earth is rocked by catastrophes and natural disasters — earthquakes and explosions — as Ra speeds away in his sonic spaceship. Once Ra’s ship is safely in space, the Earth explodes, its two halves spinning in the Outer Darkness.

The destruction is ambiguous. Heidegger’s “essential ambiguity” of being unEarthly is depicted in its catastrophe. But the catastrophe remains ambiguous in-itself.

On the one hand, it would appear that Ra condemned Earth. The Overseer, unlike Ra, is tied to Earth’s pleasures and vices, and would have no stake in its demise. But, on the other hand, nowhere is it made clear that Ra himself initiated the catastrophic events; it could be that the Earth was about to explode in any case, and that Ra’s mission was a last ditch effort to save who he could. On the album *Nuclear War* (1982), Sun Ra warns of such a self-made human catastrophe, chanting at the opening to the record, “Nuclear war... nuclear war... we’re talkin’ about... nuclear war... nuclear war... it’s a

43. An offer not unlike that of joining the Arkestra itself.

motherfucka', don't you know... if they push that button, your ass gotta go".

Nuclear war presents the ultimate in the "supreme suffering" wrought by *tekhne* — all are martyrs, the biopolitical populace of Antigones vaporizing in the *παθεῖν τὸ δεινόν τοῦτο*. Such is the catastrophe of a Heideggerean "supreme" unEarthing via technics. Is it also Ra's?

The ambiguity remains. On the other hand, in the poetic recitation "this planet is doomed", itself reminiscent of Elijah Muhammad's Motherplane, Ra says: "I got a super megatron bomb waitin' / for them . . . like man, the earth, man / is gonna melt / gonna melt, you hear me?" (Ra 2011: 2).⁴⁴

Ra's essential ambiguity is whether or not it is Sun Ra, ancient alien Kemetian deity, on the button.

Gimmel Gamma Ge: Calling Plane Erth

Where and what is Earth? This question closes this section, and the chapter.

At work in Ra's "drama of words" are deconstructive gestures at the level of the phenotext. Undertaken above, *Hearth* to *Earth* plays out what Ra calls "a different-equation story" in his 1972/1980 text, "The Glory of Shame" (2005b: 185). Ra permutes the equation of "Earth":

Behold! . . . The drama upon the tree
A drama on words
See the play?
The tree is three . . GIMEL . . . GAMMA . . . GE.
Erth is eerth is earth is erth is thre is three.
The earth is the third planet from the sun

44. Elijah Muhammad's orbital "Mothership", known in the Bible as Ezekiel's Wheel, is "The Mother Plane" filled with bombers poised to take out unbelievers and whites (see Muhammad 2004).

Can you doubt it is three?

(Ra 2005b: 185)

Geerken writes that Ra works with “language as a material” in a manner similar to the permutations of concrete poetry, where “changing one single letter moves the text to somewhere else” (2005: xxii).

The word worlds. Swiboda writes that “Ra’s approach to language involves an ostensibly non-methodical, ad-hoc process of re-combination by association”, that is nonetheless concerned with a “doubling [that] is in many ways fundamental to his music and his ideas . . . the very notion of duplicity entertains a complex philosophical and mythological set of problems and questions” (2007: 96).

Unravelling this doubling concerns us here. But in the case of Earth, the equation is three. There is more than a doubling at stake.

In “The Glory of Shame”, the duality of Ra’s “secret wisdom” hinges upon a cabbalistic reading of the permutations of “Earth” into “three”. By “cabbalistic”, I mean a mystical reading, drawn from occult and theosophical (counter)traditions, in which words reveal duplicities (or rather triplicities), in which the appearance of a text hides an underlying meaning whose meaning is also ungrounded; but I also mean a permutation in which alphanumeric values are assigned various letters, so that shifting a letter changes the equation, or numerical value, of the word, as in the Supreme Mathematics and Alphabet. We are thus dealing with hieroglyphics and acronyms. Let us explore the linguistic technicality and cloaked hermeneutics of Ra’s exoterrac enunciation:

1. In Ra’s poem above, an “h” is shifted, from *tree* to *three*. “Gimel” is the third letter of many Semitic alphabets (Phoenician, Aramaic, Hebrew, Syriac, and Arabic). “Gamma” is the third letter of the Greek alphabet. “Gê” is Gaia, the Greek goddess of Earth, and also a letter of the Cyrillic alphabet, derived

from Gamma, which has a numerical value of three, and in Latinist spellings, is symbolised by the letter “H”, and pronounced in some languages as “He”.

What to make of this?

(a) First, I wish to underscore the mathematics of the word equation: the earth is three. This mathematics is symbolised in words that name the third letter of three alphabets. And the third word listed, Gê, permutes into the numerical value of three (it is third in the list), the latin letter H, the homophony of He, and the meaning of Gaia — Earth. Earth, Gaia/Gê *is* three: it is the third letter symbol.

(b) Ra’s drama of words has *cosmic* inferences: the position of Earth to the sun as the third planet is marked. Earth is the third planet from the sun. Earth *is* three — in rotational and gravitational space to Sol.

(c) The equation earth = three takes place through the displacement of an *h*, a movement from *tree* to *three*. The “H” (permutation of Gamma-Gê) is also the letter that is erased between “tree” (symbolising Earth, the Tree of Would) and “three” (the meaning of which, beyond its numerical value, and cosmological placement of Earth, has yet to be ascertained). What is the “tree”, for Ra? The tree is wood:

The tree is wood

Would you to know? Would you to know,

The things you would to think you should?

You Would?

I thought you would.

— Sun Ra, from “The Tree is Wood” (2005a: 192–93)

The text repeats and incants. Ra begins to give us a hint: “The tree is wood, it’s would you know / But that’s a saying deep and dark” (2005a: 192). Ra calls for us to turn to the dictionary: “The will, the would upon the wood / The wood . . . look at the dictionary’s Wood. / I think you should, I think you should”. The Oxford English Dictionary (OED) provides “wood” with the expected series of meanings: hard fibrous organic material. And perhaps a red herring in the phrase “to be unable to see the wood for the trees” (perhaps not). But then there is its *archaic* meaning: “wild, with rage or excitement; insane”.

Ra continues:

Don’t forget the wood is wood
Look up the word, the pecker word
Behold the pecker . . . spirit . . . would
The pecker would. The pecker would

“Pecker”, in British slang (*OED*), means “one’s spirit or courage”. We now enter the “spirit wood” with Ra: “Peckerwould, peckerwood / Spirit wood, spiritwood”. What does a pecker do, asks Ra? “Peckers pick/discriminate / They choose to choose / I wish you would / I wish you would to choose to choose”. What is Ra asking us to choose to choose? Wait — “Watch out! There’re different kinds of wood / Somebody’s would is out to lunch / They’re out to lunch, but that’s their wood. The would”. Ra, here, tells us knowingly that we’ve discovered the ancient meaning of wood as madness. That choosing to choose — as in, *would* you do X or Y? — can mean choosing between a wou(l)d of madness, and another kind of would. (Notice we are once again displacing an *l*.) What is this madness wood, the spiritwood?

The wood . . . the tree is wood
Don't let them get you on a tree
A wooden beam, a bush (ambush) . . Behold, beware, take extra care
Don't wander out upon a limb, a lamb, a lamb a limb
Be careful of the branch, the branch . . . A pecker would, a wormwood too.
Peckerwood: wormwood too. Thus is my would I think you should.
(Ra 2005a: 193)

Now we arrive at "the tree is wood". The tree has two apparent meanings. The first is that of a lynching tree. But the second, closely related, is that of the cross: a wooden beam, the tree upon which the Christological lamb is sacrificed, or rather, branched (the beam: a branch upon which a limb is nailed). Perhaps we too go out on a limb. But Ra is warning us of trees: of lynching trees and sacrificial trees, of forms of gathering into death. Of woulds that would result in being nailed to the wood. And thus, of a choice of woulds. Of choosing to choose (peckerwood) but of wormwood (madness) too. And the wormwood? The psychoactive ingredient of absinthe — linked (incorrectly so) to madness. Following Ra verges upon a speculative madness. One is tempted to link worm-woulds to apples from the Tree of Knowledge. This may not be that far off. Ra's would.

(d) And so we turn to the homophony of "He". "He", linked to tree, and the reading of tree above, cannot but be thought as Christ, sacrificed on the cross. The Biblical reading pursued here is not unusual for Ra. Ra's polemical broadsheets, distributed in Chicago from the late 1940s through the late 1950s, detail similar Biblical permutations. But one such title is clear enough: "The Bible Is Not Written For Negroes !!!!!!!!!", it reads (2006: 89). One such passage is relevant: "THE AMERICAN NEGRO IS JUST LIKE CHRIST WHO HAD SO MUCH TO OFFER TO THE WORLD BUT CHOSE A

WAY OF SUFFERING, DISGRACE AND SHAME: THE WAY OF CHRIST CRUCIFIED” (Ra 2006: 89).⁴⁵ In the broadsheet “the way of the cross”, Ra presents a series of questions and answers. “Is the way of the cross classified as wisdom?”, to which Ra answers: “no” (2006: 79). He then cites scripture: “How is it classified? Answer: FOOLISHNESS. *I Cor. 4:9*” (2006: 79). Ra’s interrogation of Christianity, and of all three religions of the spiritwood, continues. And take note: it follows from a fundamental rejection of *suffering* as the appropriate form of being.

Let us think the tree *numerically*. It is the *third* symbolic occurrence of the tree (“spiritwood”) in the Bible’s Alpha-Omega: the first being the Tree of Knowledge in the Garden of Eden (Genesis), and the second the burning bush, in the Book of Exodus.

We have now begun to open up Ra’s Gimmel Gammel Ge and the meaning of “the tree is three”. It is the “H” that is erased, or sacrificed, to shift from three to tree. The “H” that is He: Christ.

This permutation has to be read alongside “Be-earthed” (1972/1980), in which the ontology of earth is connected to dialectic of the proper, and to the figure of “Ge’s us”:

Those who are be-earthed
Are be-erthed
Berthed
They are phonetically birthed in their berth;
They are placed in
In their place
Their place is their prace/praise/glory fame name.

45. Nearly all of his broadsheets are in CAPS. Lest one think that Ra unduly critiques Christianity, let it be known he critiques all three Abrahamic religions: for Ra, Islam is “derivative” and Christianity a “product” of Judaism, the “oldest”; yet “The history of these three religions is a bloody history and a fruitless one for while they spoke of peace, they propagated peace with a sword. All three of these religions will not be able to survive unless they repent of their bloody deeds . . . [they] have not lived up to the standards required by a true and just goodman of the house.....SUN.....” (2006: 119). Ra’s Kemetian heliocentrism is (becoming) evident.

Now Ge is one of the symbolic names of earth,
 And since that can be considered as a basic equation-form;
 We might as well consider that Ge's is earth's
 And Ge's us is Earth's us.
 — “Be-Earthed” (1980) (Ra 2005a: 3)

Ge's us, the Christological figure in the “H”, remains Earthed, berthed/birthed to Earth. Ge's us, those who belong to Ge (Earth), are *sacrificed* upon the tree of would. Abandoning hEarth requires abandoning Ge's us, permutating an-other would. A would not, or otherwise, unEarthly becoming.

2. Ra's permutation of Earth<>three expresses three concepts:

(a) first, Earth's place in the solar system as third planet from the sun; second, its place on the astral plane as “the third heaven” (Ra 2005b: 191):⁴⁶ Earth is symbolised as plane “T”, the “T” in the shape of the cross (Ra 2005b: 303): planeT;

(b) as the “tree” (which represents the *three* Biblical spiritwoods) of the Holy Trinity;

(c) the “the-----o----l o g y” of Earth as the third circle from the sun (2005b: 377), where “o”, the circle, is the “alpha omega / of the material plane” (2005b: 191).

Earth is the circle of beginning and ending, alpha and omega, the planeT of sacrifice, where life meets death: the third heaven.

In some occult traditions, there are at least *three* Earths (which Ra interprets above as “three Heavens”), the permutations of which are also to be found in Ra: “eerth”, the reversed “three” (hidden

⁴⁶ Usually, Earth is the third realm between Heaven and Hell. For Ra, “the division of heaven is inner and outer” and Earth is “the area heaven #3” (2005b: 191).

inside the Sun); permutations of “Ereth” or “erth”, the planet hidden *behind* the Sun; and Earth as we know it, plane T.

The permutation of Earth<>three, or that there is more than one Earth or rather more un-Earthlings, is an occult thesis that likewise appears in Afrofuturist science fiction.⁴⁷ In Minister Faust’s sf novel *War & Mir, Volume I: Ascension* (2012), there is more than one Earth. The others, more technologically advanced, are hidden behind the Sun. It is also an “elder race” thesis found in *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, in which the persistent encounters with humanoids is explained by the dissemination, eons ago, of proto-humanoids across the galaxy.⁴⁸ This thesis is also found in *Stargate: SG-1*. But perhaps its most intriguing Afrofuturist appearance is in an episode of *Star Trek*, the Original Series (TOS), entitled “The Paradise Syndrome”,⁴⁹ in which the crew encounters an unlikely settlement of Native Americans on a far-off M-class planet, apparently deposited by “The Preservers” in an act of interstellar cultural conservation. Of the Preservers there is no trace save for an ancient obelisk covered in hieroglyphics, its alien technology of planetary defence controlled by music — a Kemetian-Afrofuturist symbolic technology system in popular science fiction if there ever was one.⁵⁰

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Ra’s desire to *exeunt* plane T Earth is perhaps more clear. The trajectory of unEarthing is that of

47. It is also to be found in the New Age doctrine of the extraterrestrial Galactic Federation. See <<http://www.nibiruancouncil.com>> and <<http://www.paoweb.com/gfmember.htm>>.

48. Episode 146, “The Chase”, sixth season. The holographic being that appears at the end of the episode, though never explicitly stated, could be a Preserver (see below).

49. The Original Series (TOS), “The Paradise Syndrome”, episode 58, third season, broadcast October 4th, 1968 (or, Stardate 4842.6).

50. Which is to say that the writers of “The Paradise Syndrome”, Margaret Armen and Jud Taylor, knew something of Egypto-Afrocentricism and its occult theories of hieroglyphic sonic languages. Bernardi criticises this episode as it “stereotypes Native-Americans as noble savages and whites as ‘normal’ and even divine” (1998: 44). While this is certainly the case, and though white superiority is “not there as a category and everywhere as fact” (Dyer 1988: 46), Bernardi downplays the science fictional trope of *first contact* in which aliens are associated with the divine (a trope that permeates human mythology and religion) just as he downplays the suspicion cast upon “Keerok” (aka Kirk) by the tribe’s former chief, Salish. Bernardi also has nothing to say on the *Afrofuturist* aspects of the ancient obelisk, whose technology, as Spock notes, is much more advanced and powerful than that of the Enterprise. While reading for racism in *Star Trek* is a useful and necessary gesture, it remains but a first step when encountering Afrofuturism.

deplaning from the Alpha and Omega, that return to the hEarth, that would seek to properly gather — nail upon the wood; string up upon the tree; entomb or otherwise put to death — becoming homely in a gesture of sacrifice. Ra decisively abandons the hEarth: he undertakes the inappropriate becoming unhearthly. Ra's decisive unEarthing abandons the Earthly *martyrdom* of the *deinon*, and all grounded philosophies, and philosophies of the ground, that would celebrate such sacrifice.

Plane T is where life meets death on the material plane. Earth is the necropolis of Eden, “The Garden of Earth” (1972): “The Eden Garden / The Eating Garden / Necropolis, The Eatin’ Garden / Where bones and flesh of the inhabitants are eaten” (Ra 2005a: 35). All of whom are “gottened/gardened” in The Eating Garden are “In their place of berth”. Ra unberths from Earth: he seeks rebirth in other planes of there.

Allegorein of the unEarthly

Precisely what is at stake in a becoming unEarthly is a becoming of the alter-self to the “unknown factor”, as Ra will have it below, of what he elsewhere symbolises as the X, in which X is multiplicity, Exit, time, “the out, emit, cast off” of the “myth-symbolic-real”: “Come with me and you shall see, / the X’s potentially” (2005b: 439). There is no *ground* to such becoming other than that of the celebration of sacrifice and death left behind. Becoming unEarthly is not just one possibility among many, but rather the refusal of the grounds of given and calculated possibility: it commences from the risk of an impossibility, the transformative potential of a becoming, insofar as it *risks* the coordinates of possibility, and enunciates the impossible alien cogito: “I am alien”. For Ra, at risk is nothing less than the fate of

Earth itself.

Is there not a drive toward “homeliness” in Sun Ra? All signs point towards an exodus. In “To Outer Unseen Worlds”, Ra says: “Come my brother, you are dear to me / I will take you to new worlds / Greater in splendor than anything earth possesses” (2005a: 189). Ra’s planet is not just a physical sphere, but a limitless temporality of vibration-dimensions (in which, note, there is no “conformity”, no fit (*Fug*)): “there’s no society there to conform / to, man / it’s just a density in the hyperprism of the / universe, man”; it’s “nothing like the earth / it’s unlimited — / unlimited in magnitude and direction / like there’s no past, there’s no future / there’s actually no present / because everything moves in an / infinite number of dimensions / infinite number of vibratory ratios” (Ra 2011: 28–29). Ra’s world is that of “pure music”, in which “The music is a journey, the journey is endless / It is sound endlessness communication language point” (2005a: 172). Pure music is properly alien to the grounded, those left behind in sacrifice and death: “If you are selfishly-earthly bound, / Pure music is your nemesis”.

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Inconclusive: Cosmopolitanism

I have long suspected that the much vaunted “freedom” to shed the “limiting” markers of race and gender on the Internet is illusory, and that in fact it masks a more disturbing phenomenon — the whitinizing of cyberspace.

The irony of this invisibility is that African American critical theory provides very sophisticated tools for the analysis of cyberculture, since African American critics have been discussing the problem of multiple identities, fragmented personae, and liminality for over a hundred years.

— Kali Tal, “The Unbearable Whiteness of Being: African American Critical Theory and Cyberculture”, in *WIRED* magazine (1996)

Rewinding Afrofuturism

When Mark Dery convened a roundtable on Afrofuturism in 1993, assembling black science fiction writers and cultural theorists Tricia Rose, Samuel Delany and Greg Tate, Afrofuturism remained a nascent concept, a kind of catch-all aesthetic for Afrodiasporic engagements with science fiction, wherein the dominant narratives of future worlds were challenged for remaindering black cultures into subaltern and colonial roles — or erasing blackness from the future entirely.¹ Afrofuturism, in its incarnation as the outsider literature of science fiction, arose as a counter-narrative to the future’s

1. My use of subaltern here, following Dery, emphasises the strategic fiction of an underclass of nonidentity. Gilroy does the same when he writes of hip-hop’s “subaltern public sphere” (2004: 182). Technically, the total erasure of blackness *is* unrepresentable subalternity (see Spivak 1996: 203–36).

presumed white hegemony, rewriting black populations — and their stories, myths, and ways of being — into future tales of space and time travel. If there is a starting point for tracing Afrofuturism, it is perhaps with this moment at the cusp of the 1990s, when the name of Afrofuturism, while apparently signifying a coherent if not avant-gardist movement, was nonetheless proposed in its absence.²

Afrofuturism appears to emerge in limbo: as a placeholder for a movement to come, and as a signifier for a nascent, scarcely discernible field of inquiry, the tissues of which connect not only literature and philosophy, but traverse the universes of hip-hop, electronic music, and jazz to science fiction, film, and performance.³

Reading Afrofuturism as a signature arising from the already marginalised writing of science fiction (sf), the provisional concept of “Afrofuturism” was deployed as acknowledging something more than a literature, but something other than the univocity of an arts movement.⁴ Dery pinpointed a number of figures in what he called “the largely unexplored psychogeography of Afrofuturism” (1994b: 187). In particular, Dery honed in on graphic novels — “black-written, black drawn” cyberpunk comics — before drawing up a list of musical figures that centred mainly on rock ‘n’ roll, funk, and jazz: Jimi Hendrix, Herbie Hancock, Bernie Worrells, Sun Ra, Lee “Scratch” Perry, George Clinton and Parliament/Funkadelic (Dery 1994b: 182). The sole exception to the band-oriented pantheon was an exposition of “the New York graffiti artist and B-boy theoretician Rammellzee”.

Dery’s preliminary Afrofuturist inventory highlighted the diverse modes of media production

2. As Zuberi writes, “Afrofuturism is in the avant-garde of diaspora studies because it necessarily engages with the mutability of bodies and formations” (2014). And of its own concepts. This is not to confuse Afrofuturism itself as yet another manifestation of the modernist avant-garde.

3. But this is not all. Further lists will follow.

4. It was Mark Sinker, writing in 1992, who by all accounts first drew together the elements of Afrofuturism, yet without offering an all-encompassing concept for this “triumph of black American culture” that has survived “by syncretism, by bricolage, by a day-to-day programme of appropriation and adaptation as resourcefully broad-minded as any in history” (Sinker 1992).

underpinning black science fictional imaginaries. His survey also gestured toward the way in which Afrofuturism challenges modes of black representation, suggesting a performativity of its alien, cyborg, androidal, machinic, and science fictional tropes that approaches a becoming or ontogenesis of the practitioner. At stake was not just a writing *about* Afrodiasporic futurism (assembling an inventory, determining its coordinates, its meanings, its tropes, its intertextual interplays, in the production of an interstitial discourse), but the production *of* Afrofuturism in the ontogenesis of *Afrofuturists*.

In this project, I have sought to trace the implications of the following hypothesis: that becomings underpin Afrofuturism, trajectories of exodus that abandon the human as the default ground of being. My strategy throughout this thesis has been to produce a theoretical discourse from concepts sampled and theorised through Afrofuturism. These operational concepts include the *MythScience* of producing counter-realities; the temporal effects of *chronopolitics* that revision existing timelines; the “technologies of the self/object” or *concepttechnics* of production and thoughtware; and the effects of such operations, in the chronopolitics of Armageddon been-in-effect and Alien Nation. This has led to further concepts drawn from Sun Ra: *unEarthling* and *offworlding*. Besides producing a minor inventory of Afrofuturist becomings, arguing that their trajectories displace straightforward readings of identity as the allegory or representation of blackness, I have also sought to trace the chronopolitical “conditions” and “effects” of Afrofuturism as they impact the genealogy of the “human” and its necessary counterpart, the “dehumanised” slave. I have traced the production of the “slave” as coterminous to the Enlightenment invention of the “human”, suggesting that modernity, qua the Enlightenment and its discourses of philosophical justification, including technologies of race and biopolitics, commence with the invention of that which is unhumanised through transAtlantic slavery, the slave. Through this process I have

brought to bear Afrofuturist concepts upon the production and placement of “race”, and the general architecture of raciology, in various discourses. And last, but not least, I have attempted to outline, and set the stakes of, the unEarthly philosophy of exoterracist Sun Ra that offworld the homeliness of Earth and that offer an Afrofuturist counter-philosophy to the homely thought of Heidegger.

Nonetheless, I remain beset by questions. This conclusion is theoretically inconclusive because the avenues to further explore Afrofuturist thought remain. So do compelling figures — in particular the “Gothic Panzerism” treatise of RAMM:ΣLL:ZΣΣ — whose work requires a significant exegesis unto itself. These are signs of future labours. But there is a strategic question that underscore this thesis:

Can Afrofuturism proffer a means to transform raciological discourses otherwise? Can it detour, if not aid in the struggle to defeat, the techniques and practices of racism?

In *Between Camps*, Paul Gilroy argues that the Enlightenment production of the modern subject is inextricably bound-up with raciology (2004). Gilroy writes that “the consolidation of modern raciology required enlightenment and myth to be intertwined” (2004: 59). In short, the general form of *MythScience* is at the heart of the modernity. It is not named as-such, however, because of the myth of its scientificism, thus ensuring its hegemonic enunciation: that the “human” is an exceptional species of fact, and not a fiction invented to justify the enslavement of those dehumanised. I concur with Gilroy’s thesis that the Enlightenment defines the birth of the “human” by excluding the racialised slave — and the female body. Like Gilroy, I also do not believe that these are grounds to reject the Enlightenment’s “universalist promises” (2004: 62), but rather to transform them, to *universalise* them to the *omni-verse*. But it is at this point where I break allegiance with Gilroy’s drive toward “planetary humanism” with the following question, birthed from Ra: is not “the human” just another manifest of raciology, a “race” that,

while celebrating its planetary solidarity, implicitly (if not explicitly) assumes a superior relationship to the rest of Earth and its species?

Reading Gilroy's conclusion to *Between Camps*, I suggest that the "history of [Afrofuturist] appeals to the future" be considered not just as the production of vernacular forms of "extraterrestriality, futurology, and fictions of techno-science" in music and the arts, but as a trajectory that refuses to acknowledge the planetary racisms that "[deny] the future and the right to be future-oriented" (2004: 337), precisely *because* its escape velocity abandons the Earthly gravity of such constraints.

Explicating this latter point has been my task here. I have sought to trace Afrofuturism as something other than a stage in the formation of planetary humanism, just as its becomings overtake, while still utilise, figures of allegory. Afrofuturist perspectives at the very least complicate, if not refuse, the coordinates of a general *humanism*, as well as, in some instances, reject the planetary grounds of its dwelling. Remaining attentive as to how Afrofuturism addresses the concepts of the future, the planet, and the human through its practices has brought me to this preliminary conclusion: that Afrofuturism cannot be so easily contained to a planetary humanism without reducing its force and constraining it in ways that would limit its futurology and its otherworldly becomings. While I agree with Gilroy that "these [Afrofuturist] images of science, space, and interplanetary contact also reveal important break points in the apprehension and comprehension of *power*" by Afrodiasporic subjects (2004: 345),⁵ this apprehension of power is effective — imaginative, critical, productive, and inventive in its force — precisely because it bypasses any emphasis upon *grounding* its effects. This is not to say that Afrofuturism's effects *cannot* be grounded — or that they should, or should not be. But it is to say that

5. Gilroy here writes "African Americans", thereby inscribing the limitations of a nationalism that appear surprising given the Afrodiasporic analysis he is otherwise engaged with.

doing so will limit the force of Afrofuturism's "appeal to the future". While Afrofuturism can be considered but part of the "gradual realization that black freedom struggles inside and outside colonial space had acquired geopolitical, planetary significance" (Gilroy 2004: 345), I am led to ask if positioning Afrofuturism within this narrative of "gradual realization" ignores the radical breaks that Afrofuturist practitioners have made with the coordinates of consensual reality. Such a progress narrative also forecloses the retrieval of past futurisms. Sun Ra's act of renaming in 1952 stands as a counterpoint to any such progress narrative of slow awakenings to planetary significance (see Szwed 1998: 82). Ra and his Arkestra adherents as well as Thmei Research colleagues were already discussing the interplanetary force of "cosmic space jazz" in the mid-1950s, as well as undertaking studies and publishing broadsheets — such as the "Solaristic Precepts" later handed to John Coltrane (Szwed 1998: 76) — that interrogated questions of space, time, race, African history, Kemet, and theology.

Throughout this thesis, I have explored the processes by which Afrofuturist becomings abandon the category of the human. The "master race" — that of the human in-itself — is critically abandoned through Afrofuturist operations of exodus that undertake transformative becomings. I have sought to explicate the means of such becomings through their MythSciences: "real fictions" designed to abandon the white hegemony of what Du Bois calls that "other world" (1994: 2) by constructing what Sun Ra calls "other planes of there" (2005a). I have drawn upon, and sought to explicate, the ways in which *Alien Nation*, *chronopolitics*, and *Armageddon been-in-effect* strive to "restructure the world" — as Fanon saw was necessary (2008: 63) precisely because "*it is the racist who creates the inferiorized*" (2008: 73) — by catalysing *unEarthly* worldviews, these "other other outer worlds" in which the human and Earth itself are *offworlded*.

I have also sought to address how raciology is bound-up with the advent of the Enlightenment and the birth of the modern subject, as “conditions” of the Afrofuturist abandonment of the human. In his March 17th lecture of 1976, Foucault spoke of how racism is the “mechanism that allows biopower to work” in the production of global technologies of population control: it provides the *justification* for the “murderous function of the State”, where murder is defined not only directly, but indirectly: “the fact of exposing someone to death, increasing the risk of death for some people, or, quite simply, political death, expulsion, rejection, and so on” (2003: 256). In short, the murderous function operates through the disproportional incarceration of racialised peoples; the dispossession of land and the enclosure of common lands; the gentrification of impoverished neighbourhoods; the lowering of wages and overtaxation of the poor; police brutality and racial profiling; the expansion of the security state into globalised surveillance, torture, and extraordinary rendition; the deportations of refugees; the perimeter walls across borders that now mark the hardlining of nation-states while corporate interzones in underdeveloped countries become lawless nonplaces of de facto industrialised slavery.⁶ As Foucault was quick to point out, the “murderous function” is not only wielded against an-other population without — “the war on terror”, “fundamentalists”, “rogue states”, etc. — but aimed within, so that its “evolutionary” purification “regenerate[s] one’s own race” (Foucault 2003: 256–8.) In the biopolitics of hardline capitalism, raciology justifies the loss of those too weak to survive, or the “weeding out” of those undesirable to begin with.⁷ But if this is the case, then surely such functions did not begin with the imperialist and colonialist invention of black Atlantic slavery?

6. I have published elsewhere on the technological apparatuses that constructed the era of planetary surveillance, in an investigation as to whether “temporary autonomous zones” — spatialities of elsewhere/elsewhen that drift near invisibly between map and territory — remain potential sites of resistance and exodus. See (van Veen 2009).

7. As I finish these words, I read that Canada’s prison population has reached an all-time high, with the number of “visible minorities” increasing 75% in the last decade (see Brosnahan 2013).

Turning to Derrida, I have sought to trace the problematic of raciology further by reading the raciology of “the human” within the white mythology of Western metaphysics. By “Western metaphysics” I mean the discourse that produces the generality of the “exceptionalised human”: the “knowledge” or epistemic regime that is the condition of possibility for biopolitics. “Western metaphysics” signals the thought of a pure presence at the origin. Thus, I have traced the raciology of human exceptionalism as coterminous to the thinking of origin that links the auto-effective genesis of self-consciousness to the parousia of presence.

Wherever there is proclaimed “the human” as that superior being, even, or rather precisely where one finds “post-racial” formations, there one will find raciology at the core of its being.

I would like to conclude by returning, again, to Gilroy. For Gilroy, the way forward is through “planetary humanism”, a “subversive force” that seeks to abolish race in the establishment of a renewed cosmopolitanism (2004: 17). Planetary humanism, Gilroy writes, is the “deliberate and self-conscious renunciation of ‘race’ . . . This radically nonracial humanism exhibits a primary concern with the forms of human dignity that race-thinking strips away” (2004: 17). I would like to suggest that planetary humanism risks mirroring the teleological form of Sartre’s critique of Negritude — which Fanon describes as leaving him as “without a black past, without a black future” (2008: 117) — unless it opens itself to its offworld other(s). The problem of “the raceless future paradigm” has been identified from the start by Alondra Nelson in her introduction to the Afrofuturism special issue of *Social Text* (2002): “that race (and gender) distinctions would be eliminated with technology was perhaps the founding fiction of the digital age” (2002: 1).

The position in which I have conceptualised Afrofuturism, however, is not the antithesis of Gilroy’s:

it is not to argue for a black technohumanism (as does Weheliye (2002), as discussed in chapter one), or for the essential or even strategic persistence of tactical humanisms such as Afrocentrism: alternative historical, political, and performative perspectives that, although mired in racialisation, undertake important destabilizing operations of white hegemony. I too see the need to abandon such positions. But such an abandonment does not necessarily mean defaulting to a general “humanism”, nor does it mean leaving the production of contested chronopolitical revisionings behind. Rather, it means utilising the latter to unearth the former: herein operates Afrofuturism.

It is here that I have attempted to explicate the complexities of an Afrofuturist “position”: a “position” that rejects the fundamental assumption that *humanism*, even in its planetary shape, is the only means by which to “contradict [as Gilroy and I both wish] the triumphal tones of the anthropological discourses that were enthusiastically supportive of race-thinking in earlier, imperial times” (Gilroy 2004: 17) — as well as, in other, more pernicious, biopolitical forms that persist to this day. I would like to point out, however, that Afrofuturism rejects disembodied forms of *posthumanism* apace with planetary humanism. While, at times, I have deployed the signifier of “post-human” to articulate certain strains or aspects of Afrofuturist becoming as *other* to the category of the human, it should be clear that Afrofuturist abandonments of the human have had little to do with the disembodiment fetishes of cybertheory. Information, in this tale of posthuman disembodiment, also loses its “race” and “gender”, even as it strangely maintains its default white masculinity. Such posthuman dreams of disembodiment replicate the technophilic control discourses at the heart of biopolitics, in which the maniacal desire to perpetually extend life and ward off death becomes the “ultimate privilege of immortality”, as Hayles writes, by “choosing to download yourself into a

computer” (1999: 287).

But I would also like to suggest that the association of posthumanism with an *embodied* technology fetishism — in which mobile devices articulate the body to always-online information, rendering embodiment geolocate, mapped for consumerism, and above all a subject of surveillance (as depicted, and critiqued, in Steven Shavero’s *Connected* (2003)) — *also* constrains the concept of posthumanism. Since Alondra Nelson’s positioning of Afrofuturism as a discourse to counter ideologies of the “digital divide” in the 1990s, in which “blackness gets constructed as always oppositional to technologically driven chronicles of progress” (2002: 1), there has been a tendency to equate *Afrofuturist* posthumanism with those very progress narratives — thereby “overcoming” the opposition by embracing the consumer ideologies of Silicon Valley and its techno-libertarian capitalism. In Ytasha Womack’s *Afrofuturism*, a number of such quotes abound, in which technology is celebrated as the enabler of Afrofuturist posthumanism: “Today technology enables a greater ability to create and share images across the world. Social media, websites, music downloads, digital cameras, low-cost sound engineering, at-home studios, editing equipment, and on and on” (2013: 134). Though Womack reflects a “common-sense” perspective that increased access to low-cost communications technologies has facilitated the spread of “Afrofuturism”, there is the tendency to equate the offworld futurology and alien becomings *of* Afrofuturism *to* the uncritical adoption of widespread consumer communications technologies. This seems all the more reason to question digital technologies in the context of Afrofuturism. Is it possible to think Afrofuturism as critical of the technologies that doubtless enable its dissemination and production? What are the downsides to such technologies when they have just as well been used to conduct surveillance and policing operations?

From the unEarthly vantage of Afrofuturism, Hayles' concept of the posthuman also remains grounded. Hayles' posthuman "nightmare is a culture inhabited by posthumans who regard their bodies as fashion accessories rather than the *ground of being*" (my italics 1999: 5). This phrase deserves more examination than I can give it here. Isn't the nightmare on both sides of this opposition, not only to construct the posthuman body as a "fashion accessory", but to bound it to the *ground of being*? In what ways can subaltern bodies be read, in their servitude — or at the limit, enslaved bodies in the Big House — as "fashionable accessories"? How does the export of imaginary blackness as "ethnic infotainment" play into its fashionable accessorisation as a "posthumanism" to be shrugged on and off? Where "blackness can now signify vital prestige rather than abjection in a global info-tainment telesector" (Gilroy 2004: 36)? What I wish to suggest is that *Armageddon been-in-effect* already situates the posthuman nightmare as having already taken place. And it has taken place while some posthumans worked the "ground of being" of the other.

While Hayles seeks to "dream" of a posthumanism that "understands human life is embedded in a material world of great complexity, one on which we depend for our continued survival" (1999: 5), the articulation of "human life" to the "*ground of being*" suggests an Earthly — which is to say, racialological and ontotheological — constraint to Hayles' "version of the posthuman that embraces possibilities of information technologies without being seduced by fantasies of unlimited power and disembodied immortality" (Hayles 1999: 5). As I suggested in chapter one, Alexander Weheliye elaborates the ways in which race is erased upon precisely such grounds.

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In the trajectory of becoming Afrofuturist, there are only questions before us.

Will the “human” species be the only member of the planet’s cosmopolitan club?

Or perhaps a different sort of question: is planetary humanism even desirable, given its gravitational pull to the Earthly ground of being, and to unifying one sole species-being, that of the human, to the exclusion of its alien others?

Afrofuturism speculates upon a third alternative for our third stone from the sun: a *cosmopolitanism* that seeks to transform species-being in an *omni-verse of becoming alien*. The concept of “cosmopolitanism” will remain unfulfilled: a concept-to-come, to be elaborated through the futures of Afrofuturism. A *multiverse* — to use RAMM:ΣLL:ZΣΣ’s concepttechnics — that is no longer bound to the terrestrial, or the *universe*. A multiverse that affirms its alien ex-centricity to Earth. A *cosmopolitanism* of alien becomings. Cosmopolitanism suggests, in its signifier that points to the stars, that the “human” itself is a contingent becoming, one that is well due for short-circuiting in light of the many others to which we remain hostile aliens.⁸

• • •

Everything is in place but you, Planet Earth!

Space Is the Place (1974). I return to Ra’s card game to close with a chant. Sun Ra is placing a potentially catastrophic bet with the Overseer. The game itself is depicted as a surreal blaxploitation of Bergman’s chess match with Death in *The Seventh Seal* (1957): Sun Ra has set the stakes to nothing less than the fate of humanity. And he has always desired to cheat Death. Yet it is unclear whether he wishes to save the human race — which is what the Overseer *assumes*. Down on his luck, Ra reveals a telling

8. I am indebted to Sha LaBare’s dissertation, “Farfetchings: On and In the SF Mode” (2010) for connecting Afrofuturism to a broader critique of speciest thinking, and to the voicings of the Space Ape, for the resonant phrase “hostile aliens” on the track “Space Ape” (*Burial*, 2006).

phrase before accepting a double or nothing side bet: “sometimes when you lose, you win”.⁹

Unlike Bergman’s Knight, however, Ra is an alien deity and the Overseer, though powerful, is not the figure of Death. The game is up for grabs, and at a crucial point in the match Ra places a side bet that wins him a concert for the Arkestra. An eerie, sparse chant is played out during the performance, in which Arkestra member June Tyson echoes the incantations of Sun Ra:

We are an-other order of being...

we are another order of being!

We bring to you the mathematics of alter-destiny...

we bring to you the mathematics of alter-destiny!

Look up, see the greater universe...

look up, see the greater universe!

Everything is in place, every thought every planet...

everything is in place, every thought, every planet...

Everything is in place but you, planet Earth!

everything is in place but you, planet Earth...!

You are just like you always were, in your improper place...

you are just like you always were, in your im-proper place...

Living your improper lives and dying your improper deaths...

living your im-proper lives and dying your im-proper deaths...

Change your time for the unknown factor...

*change your time for the unknown factor...*¹⁰

Time passes away, but the unknown is immeasurable, and never passes away...

9. The gambler’s phrase is sampled from Kant, which Harmut Geerken traces to Ra’s 1972 poem “Thing in Itself”. Ra engages in a rhythmic play of an “incorrectly” quoted *Ding and Sich* (2005: xxiv): “Thing in itself? A thing, a thing / Ding and sich? / A thing, a thing / What’s your thing?” (Ra 2005b: 380). There is another Kantian twist. In *Critique of Practical Reason*, chapter II §2 ¶5, Kant argues that the Highest Good necessarily implies the Highest Cause (God). The “concept of the highest good” is the “kingdom of God” (2006: 107), and the Kingdom of God is Heaven, which is, of course, attainable only through death. Is this not why, then, that Sun Ra (apparently) blows up the Earth (to “Kingdom Come”, as it were) at the end of the film?

10. The “unknown factor” is symbolised in Ra’s text by an “X”, just as it is adopted by the Nation of Islam as a means of displacing the paternal last name of the slave owner.

Time passes away, but the unknown is immeasurable, and never passes away...

The unknown is eternal because you will never know what it is all about...

The unknown is eternal because you will never know what it is all about...

Your wisdom will be when you say I DO NOT KNOW

*Your wisdom! Will be when you say: I DO NOT KNOW.*¹¹

Your ignorance will be your salvation...

Your ignorance! Will be your salvation...



11. The Socratic inflection is clear: “ἐν οἷδα ὅτι οὐδὲν οἷδα ἢ οἶδα ὅτι οὐδὲν οἶδα”, “I know one thing: that I know nothing”, which appears nowhere in Plato’s texts, but whose variants can be discerned in the *Meno* and the *Apologia*.

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