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# **THE “ROBOT VODOO POWER” THESIS: AFROFUTURISM AND ANTI-ANTI-ESSENTIALISM FROM SUN RA TO KOOL KEITH**

**J. Griffith Rollefson**

In 1999 Alondra Nelson, then a graduate student in American Studies at New York University, launched an online community dedicated to the study of what might be best described to the uninitiated as black science fiction. Nelson named the forum the “AfroFuturism” listserve after a term coined by Mark Dery in his set of interviews about black artists whose works displayed a uniquely African American take on futuristic narratives of scientific and technological progress (Dery 1993). As Nelson explains, Dery and his interviewees—the scholars Tricia Rose and Greg Tate and the novelist Samuel Delany: claimed that these 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. Science fiction was a recurring motif in the music of these artists, they argued, because it was an apt metaphor for black life and history (Nelson 2007).

Since the beginnings of the listserve, its contributors have commented on countless aspects of Afrofuturist culture and art, debated its aims and methods, and otherwise shaped the definition of Afrofuturism to the extent that it has become a recognizable field of scholarly inquiry and artistic production.<sup>i</sup> Later in 1999 Nelson organized a conference on the subject, “AfroFuturism | Forum: a critical dialogue on the future of black cultural production,” at NYU and in 2002 a special issue of Social Text highlighted the subject featuring recent Afrofuturist poetry, prose, visual arts, and scholarship.

While the moniker “Afrofuturism” and the study thereof are relatively new phenomena, we can trace a long legacy of Afrofuturist cultural production. Scholars of Afrofuturism have recognized elements of the project in the work of novelist Ralph Ellison and bandleader Sun Ra as early as the 1950s (Weheliye 2003; Yaszek; Eshun; Zuberi). This vein of artistic production continued through the 1970s with the prose and stage works of Ishmael Reed and LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka) and the disco-funk of George Clinton’s Parliament-Funkadelic up through the 1980s with the street art of Jean-Michel Basquiat and the raps of the Ultramagnetic MCs. Today, the most notable examples of Afrofuturist activity continue to be found in the world of hip hop, where artists like Cee-Lo, Del tha Funkee Homosapien, and Kool Keith—formerly of the Ultramagnetic MCs—have laid claim to the supersonic identities, interplanetary alter-egos, and robotic surrealities of the Afrofuturist legacy.

Much more than straightforward science fiction, however, the epistemes that accompany these identities reflect an oppositionality and an historical critique that seeks to undermine the logic of linear progress that buttresses Western universalism, rationalism, empiricism, logocentrism and their standard-bearer: white supremacy. Lisa Yaszek offers a concise yet comprehensive summary of this critique in the introduction to her article “An Afrofuturist Reading of Ralph Ellison’s Invisible Man”:

As an intellectual 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 (297).

In short, as the Afrofuturist scholar Alexander Weheliye puts it, this black science fiction ideology reflects “a posthumanism not mired in the residual effects of white liberal subjectivity (2002, 30).”

On the 1970 live album It's After the End of the World, composer and keyboardist Sun Ra gives us a taste of this posthumanism taking his audience on a musical voyage through his trademark black sci-fi world-view. On Ra's piece “Myth Versus Reality (The Myth-Science Approach)” vocalist June Tyson and alto saxophonist Danny Davis ask: “If you are not a reality, whose myth are you? If you are not a myth, whose reality are you?” before launching into space on Ra's moog-powered rocket. Indeed, throughout his performing career Ra challenged received knowledge and presumptive truths through his steadfast claim that he was born on Saturn. But far from a purely fiction driven enterprise, Ra's material critique becomes apparent as Davis continues, explaining matter-of-factly: “I don't expect to be a citizen of this planet, it takes too long.” As I will argue, the seemingly paradoxical concept of “Myth-Science” is the key to understanding Ra's fantastic but liberating Afrofuturist philosophy. Moreover, the term's ambivalent unity is at the binary collapsing core of the larger Afrofuturist project.

Since the term “Afrofuturism” first appeared, scholars have seized upon the idea as a way to critique the reified distance between racialized fictions of black magic and white science—often in satirical and even playful ways. Yet, 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.” As Nelson explains: “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.... Blackness gets constructed as always oppositional to technologically driven chronicles of progress” (2002, 1). 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.

As a partial corrective for this potential pitfall of the Afrofuturist project, I will propose a theoretical framework for Afrofuturism premised on Paul Gilroy’s notion of “anti-anti-essentialism,” which first appeared in the pages of this journal in 1991. Central to this model is the idea manifest in Nelson’s explication of Afrofuturism that the idea of a “race-free future” smacks of a white (male) future. As Dery asks:

Can a community whose past has been deliberately rubbed out, and whose energies have subsequently been consumed by the search for legible traces of its history, imagine possible futures? Furthermore, isn’t 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?” (738)

In order to expose this false utopia the Afrofuturist project also focuses on the past through its tactical recovery of black soul.

At the core of this balancing act is an understanding that the concepts of soul and authenticity are constructions that play on tropes of voodoo magic—a supposed retention from the “dark continent.” These themes are nowhere more evident than in the spectacle of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century musical forms that stereotyped, amplified, and ultimately capitalized on tropes of black superstition (as with the Jim Crow character of blackface minstrelsy) and eroticized black primitivism (as with Josephine Baker’s banana costume). But, although the idea of musical “soul”—and the related sexualized term “funk”—can play to the essentialist stereotypes of white supremacy in the U.S. and abroad, it has also proven a powerful tool for promoting black solidarity. The Afrofuturist strategy therefore highlights the magical qualities of black authenticity by articulating it to the equally

fantastic anti-authenticity of white science fiction and playing with the resulting ironies. In short, this is what Sun Ra describes as “The Myth-Science Approach.”

Promoting neither the ethnic nationalism of essentialist thought nor the free-floating identities of post-structuralism I aim to show that Afrofuturism’s third way offers a critique of both positions by erasing the rationalized distance between the two seemingly irreconcilable poles and therefore fundamentally undermining the terms of debate. To capture the implications of this collapsed binary I am using a line from Kool Keith’s tune “Earth People” wherein the rapper’s Jupiter-born alter ego conjures the notion of “robot voodoo power”—a formulation echoing Ra’s “Myth-Science” in which Keith collapses tropes of white science and black magic one onto the other (Kool Keith 1996). Where the stereotyped vision of Afro-Caribbean voodoo stands in as a signifier of blackness, the robot stands as a similarly stable symbol of whiteness. As Theo Cateforis explains in a section from a recent article on the whiteness of Devo titled “Robotic Bodies, White Bodies”: “...the robot is precisely that type of loaded signifier that opens out onto a much larger cultural window...” (566). To be sure both voodoo and robots are real—but to the extent that they stand in as entrenched symbols of race, their meanings are wholly fantastic. As I will argue, Kool Keith consolidates these loaded signifiers of whiteness and blackness in a manner consistent with the most ingenious forms of Afrofuturist cultural critique. I offer this “Robot Voodoo Power” Thesis not as a stand-in for Afrofuturism but as an explicit attempt to keep open the dialectical play implicit in the most successful of Afrofuturist statements. As I will argue, it is the racialized tension between future and past, science and myth, robots and voodoo, that gives Afrofuturism its critical power.

My aims in this study are fourfold. First, I outline a working definition of Afrofuturism by establishing at some length the historical and theoretical underpinnings of this cultural field. Second, I tease out the continuities between Nelson’s “Afrofuturism” and

Gilroy's "anti-anti-essentialism" in a detailed explanation of the "Robot Voodoo Power" Thesis. Following from this background, I trace the musical and philosophical trajectory of Sun Ra's concept of "Myth-Science" through George Clinton's "P-Funk" to Kool Keith's "Robot Voodoo Power" to support this thesis (see Fig. 1). If Afrofuturism is most prominent in music, I argue, it is because a number of its artists have continually highlighted the mythic qualities of both historical tropes of magic and futuristic narratives of science through the seemingly paradoxical figure of the soulful spaceman. I conclude the study by assessing the value of the Afrofuturist project in terms of its political efficacy as both an artistic expression and a field of scholarly inquiry. As the diverse but not divergent contents of the Afrofuturism special issue of Social Text indicate, the difference between Afrofuturist "art" and "scholarship" is often difficult to discern.

**[Insert fig. 1 Here]**

Fig. 1—Three Musical Afrofuturists: Sun Ra, George Clinton, and Kool Keith

### **From Souls to Hypersouls**

In 1903, when W. E. B. Du Bois first laid out his foundational concept of "double consciousness" in The Souls of Black Folk, the author was breaking new ground by making a gesture to the subtle but deeply meaningful ways that "black" American identity is experienced through its relationship to "white" Americans. Deeply rooted in Hegelian dialectics, Du Bois's work examined a fissure within the Enlightenment concept of human subjectivity as it related to African Americans. As a residual effect of abduction, chattel

slavery, and continued inequality, Du Bois explained, black identities were forced to forever navigate the white fantasies inscribed upon them.

The first and most visceral description of double consciousness comes only three paragraphs into the study as Du Bois writes: “One ever feels his two-ness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body” (38). Not fifty years earlier black bodies were denied the very designation of “human” in much of the U.S., and that designation was tenuous at best in the rest of the country. By the turn of the century, little progress had been made in correcting the violent inequities of slavery and its memory remained as a sort of residue still bound to the overwritten black body. Double consciousness was a direct cause of this disjuncture between the promise of equality and the reality of American racism. As such, the central question to Du Bois’s work was how to humanize a people so recently deemed subhuman—specifically 3/5 human in one infamously legalistic figuration. Notably, Du Bois saw music as the most potent way for African Americans to express their humanity—their soul—and take their place among equals. Music, argued Du Bois, was the “greatest gift of the Negro people” to their country and the best answer to the question of unfulfilled equality (186).

Fifty years after Souls, Ralph Ellison wrote Invisible Man, the story of a black man struggling to be seen for who he is rather than as a figment of a white national imaginary. In the novel, the unnamed protagonist’s struggle for human subjectivity in American society reaches an impasse. His quest for humanness is subsequently rerouted in the surreal and fantastic prologue/denouement of the novel wherein Ellison’s protagonist cuts himself off from the rest of the world—from human history—and fashions for himself a new subjectivity.<sup>ii</sup> He encloses himself in a subterranean space beneath the streets of New York City and blasts his invisible body with the electrified intensity of artificial light and the



phonographically amplified and multiplied sound of Louis Armstrong's voice surging forth from five stereos.

As Alexander Weheliye argues in his Afrofuturist study “‘I Am I Be’: The Subject of Sonic Afro-Modernity,” although Armstrong's voice is a powerful signifier of the black body and its supposed innate musicality, this new subjectivity is borne not of a primordial racial determinism but rather articulated through the electro-technological mediation and amplification of the human voice's magic. The black subjectivity that Ellison envisions is thoroughly ultramodern yet somehow still rooted in the ineffable, the soul. Weheliye describes this electro-mediatization of soul as “hypersoul”—a concept that resonates deeply with “Myth-Science” and that I argue is foundational to the study of Afrofuturism. As Weheliye describes in another article “‘Feenin’: Posthuman Voices in Contemporary Black Popular Music”: “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...” (30). Hypersoul thus mediates—in two divergent senses—the authenticating discourses of black soul. That is, paradoxically, it augments soul through electronic media just as it attenuates the logic of authenticity and thereby undermines the constructed meaning of soul.

The “hybridities” of hypersoul, Weheliye adds, underscore the fluid nature of this hyper-black subjectivity. In using the hip hop group De La Soul's phrase “I Am I Be” from the album Buhloone Mind State, Weheliye foregrounds this fluidity as a simultaneously static subjectivity (“I Am”) and dynamic instability of being in the world (“I Be”). Notably, the proliferation of alter egos in hip hop plays upon this dynamic subjectivity. In one exemplary case, the prolific Kool Keith changes identities on each consecutive album. Once “Dr. Octagon,” then “Matthew,” “Dr. Doom” and “Black Elvis,” Keith simultaneously draws upon

the signifying power of stable identities and subverts those identities by highlighting their caricature status. In doing so, he critiques the idea of identity as only “I Am.” As Afrofuturist scholar Kodwo Eshun explains in his prosaic examination of Afrofuturism More Brilliant than the Sun: Adventures in Sonic Fiction: “the self no longer amputates itself down to a single part but instead asserts that I is a crowd, that the human is a population of processes.... What used to be called alter-egos are now multi-egos, a crowd of synthetic subjects” (27). Similarly, Weheliye describes how this hyper-mediated and replicated “surplus of signification” provides the “Subject of Afro-modernity” with its aesthetic and critical power (111).

In her introduction to the Afrofuturism special issue in Social Text, Alondra Nelson writes that over the past century African American musicians have continually retooled this subjectivity. Not a powerful new “tactic for negotiating forms of oppression” but a worldview wrought of double consciousness that “has long been the experience of African diasporic people” (3). From Sun Ra’s astronomical and astrological subjectivity, through George Clinton’s Dr. Funkenstein and his cloned “specially designed Afronauts,” to Kool Keith’s “Black Elvis Lost in Space” character, Afrofuturists have inscribed onto their bodies alternative identities that eschew the idea of universal humanity at the center of Western Enlightenment thought. As Etienne Balibar explains in his “Racism as Universalism,” the Western concept of universalism “compensates for the ‘excesses’ of racism” (198). In effect, he argues that the universal ideal of Western humanism is a rationalized cover-up of an irrational system of racialized hierarchies that inform post-Enlightenment thinking on every level. For the Afrofuturists, this universal humanity that was so long denied black Americans has proven itself a conception so thoroughly encoded as white that it is best left disregarded, bypassed—no longer a dream deferred, but a dream discarded.

This Afrofuturist subjectivity is then a tactical, contingent, and embodied identity in that it recognizes the constructed nature of both the myth of the subhuman and the myth of the superhuman. Out of the primitive fantasies constructed about black bodies and the cybernetic fantasies of science fiction, the Afrofuturists fashion an identity that is an inherent critique of white supremacist society. By collapsing the past and the future onto the white supremacist present, these Afrofuturists simultaneously assert their new subjecthood and levy their dissent from the existing order.

### **The “Robot Voodoo Power” Thesis**

What I have argued up until now is largely in line with what scholars of Afrofuturism—particularly those involved with the AfroFuturism listserve—have recognized in this technophilic project of alternative subject/identity. Yet, in representing Afrofuturism in the preceding pages I have made a concerted effort to balance the tension between fantasies of both “the past” and “the future.” As the moniker “Afrofuturism” implies, the scholarly focus on this phenomenon has tended towards the future, the technological. Indeed, much of Afrofuturism’s humor and playfulness derives its power from the irony of the visual image of African Americans engaging in futuristic activities that have too often been coded as white in American media culture. This is where the subject of Afrofuturism gets a bit tricky.

The ironic power of Afrofuturism is nowhere more evident than in the Saturday Night Live character of “Astronaut Jones” played by Tracy Morgan. The comic premise of these sketches—that show the black astronaut bumbling about until his attention is focused by a sexualized space alien—is that blacks do not belong in space if for no other reason than they are not yet fully civilized. Indeed, the premise of Afrofuturism relies on the normalized disparity between the black body and the cybernetic technological future. The project gets its power by transgressing the boundaries of this mediatized binary. Yet, the danger with this

strategy is that it can quickly turn from a critical commentary into a re-stabilization of black inferiority through simple contrast rather than continually highlighting the historical constructedness of both the myths about blackness and the myths about whiteness. As a partial corrective for this potential pitfall of the Afrofuturist project, I would like to propose a theoretical framework that keeps a critical eye on the ideological underpinnings of the rational, empirical, and scientific as well as the irrational, unexplainable, and magical.

Following from Paul Gilroy's discussion of the unsatisfactory nature of the two critical positions most commonly taken with regard to black identity—the essentialist and anti-essentialist arguments—I would like to propose that Afrofuturism reflects a strategic version of what Gilroy first refers to as “anti-antiessentialism” in his article “Sounds Authentic: Black Music, Ethnicity, and the Challenge of a ‘Changing’ Same” (123-128) and later as “anti-anti-essentialism” in his The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness (96-110). Through playful engagement with the primitivist tropes of voodoo or black magic and their ironic juxtaposition to science fiction as a sort of white magic, Afrofuturism strikes blows to both the black nativist stance (read: essentialist) and the white poststructuralist argument (read: anti-essentialist).

As Gilroy sees it, essentialist arguments are of questionable political efficacy, but because of continued inequality it is not yet time for the free-floating identities of postmodernists. He writes: “the unashamedly hybrid character of these black Atlantic cultures continually confounds any simplistic (essentialist or anti-essentialist) understanding of the relationship between racial identity and racial non-identity, between folk cultural authenticity and pop cultural betrayal” (1993, 99). Gilroy's anti-anti-essentialism thus critiques black nationalism as an outmoded ideology and denounces post-structuralism as a white idealist project while recovering the idea that blackness has real material meaning as a cultural category. As W. E. B. Du Bois argued in his 1897 “The Conservation of Races”:

“We believe it the duty of the Americans of Negro descent, as a body, to maintain their race identity until this mission of the Negro people is accomplished, and the ideal of human brotherhood has become a practical possibility” (237). I suggest that the strategic anti-anti-essentialism of Afrofuturism is a critical project with the mission of laying the groundwork for a humanity that is not bound up with the ideals of white Enlightenment universalism. This, in brief, is the “Robot Voodoo Power” Thesis—and this is where Afrofuturism’s third way becomes apparent.

Although Gilroy does not comment directly on “Afrofuturism,” his work anticipated the field of inquiry through its deep engagement with the manner in which technologies confound discourses of black authenticity—especially in music. In his 1991 article “Sounds Authentic” Gilroy writes specifically of “the opportunity to use music as a model that can break the deadlock between the two unsatisfactory positions that have dominated recent discussion of black cultural politics” (124). Updating Amiri Baraka’s idea of the “changing same,” he employs the historical fact of technological innovation in black music—from country to urban blues, from jazz to fusion, and from turntable based to digitally produced hip hop—to argue against binary formulations (123-133).<sup>iii</sup> His choice of the double negative term “anti-anti-essentialism” to describe this position also reflects the playfulness of the Afrofuturists in its recognition that it is in fact the rigid binary between the essentialist and anti-essentialist positions that is the real joke. Indeed, it is this double rhetorical move and its side-stepping of double consciousness in favor of a third way that makes Afrofuturism’s anti-anti-essentialism so ingenious and potent. And like Weheliye’s dynamic reading of Afrofuturism, Gilroy’s anti-anti-essentialism stresses the hybridities and synchronisms of “I Am I Be.” Indeed, Gilroy’s sentiments about “folk cultural authenticity and pop cultural betrayal” echo those of De La Soul’s Buhloon Mind State—an album that begins with the

repeated mantra of “it might blow up [i.e. become wildly popular] but it won’t go pop [i.e. betray itself].”

Perhaps the most explicit of Gilroy’s linkages with Afrofuturism come in his discussion of Parliament-Funkadelic’s utopian potentialities from his first book: *‘There Ain’t no Black in the Union Jack’* (1987).<sup>1</sup> Closely echoing Ra’s concept of Myth-Science, he describes how P-Funk’s futuristic visions held a potential through which “The destructive capacity of America’s technological rationality would be held in check by mystic, natural forces contained within the pyramids of ancient Egypt, a durable symbol of black pride and creativity” (180). In the following section, I support this continuity between Afrofuturism and anti-anti-essentialism—this “Robot Voodoo Power” Thesis—through a discussion of the music and philosophies of three musicians that represent the best of the Afrofuturist tradition. Furthermore, I argue that it is the seamless embodiment of Afrofuturist hybridity/simultaneity in the performative musicality of these three artists that render their philosophical statements so powerful.

### **From “Myth-Science” to “Robot Voodoo Power”**

On It’s After the End of the World, Sun Ra takes his audience on a musical voyage through an epistemic framework that reflects a powerfully evocative vision in which past and future, fact and fiction are collapsed upon one another.<sup>iv</sup> Implicit in Ra’s equating of “reality” and “science” in their counterpoint to “myth” on the piece “Myth Versus Reality (The Myth-Science Approach)” is a questioning of rationality and even history. For him, the history writers are complicit in the subjugation of African Americans and the perpetuation of Euro-American racism. Indeed, Ra’s view of historians resonates with Othman Sullivan’s

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Gilroy, *‘There Ain’t no Black in the Union Jack’: The Cultural Politics of Race and Nation* (London: Hutchinson, 1987).

notoriously witty statement about anthropologists: “I think this anthropology is just another way to call me a nigger” (quoted in Kelley, 16). As Ra commented in a 1980 documentary entitled A Joyful Noise: “I’m not a part of history, I’m more a part of mystery.”

For Ra, this mystery is part of a highly complex understanding of the world through contingency and positionality. He explains his dialectics from an iconic position on Washington D.C.’s Pennsylvania Avenue later in the documentary: “You can’t have anything without a comparison. I’m sitting in front of the White House looking across the street and I don’t see the black house.... See, you can’t have anything without its parallel and its opposite. This is something the people of Earth are unaware of.” Throughout his oeuvre, Ra portrays a world that is infinitely more complex—and mystical—than the rationally narrativized past of facts in chronology. Yet, his episteme is not grounded in magic, for in his view myth cannot function without its “parallel and its opposite”: reality (science).<sup>v</sup> It is simply the idea that the past can be explained solely in terms of reality with which Ra finds fault.

Ra first employed the term “myth-science” in the mid-1950s to describe his musical collective, a rather traditional jazz orchestra in terms of instrumentation, that he dubbed the “Myth-Science Arkestra.” From his earliest performances with the Arkestra, Ra’s music featured progressive blues and jazz harmonies coupled with quasi-African grooves in expansive arrangements with titles like “Saturn” and “Ancient Aiethopia” (1958). By the 1960s, with albums such as When the Sun Comes Out (1963) Ra added space-centered chants and freely and wildly improvised lines and odd timbres to his already eclectic compositional language. Through the 1960s and 1970s the instrumentation of his ensemble expanded to include traditional West African hand drums, shakers, and bells in addition to hyperfuturistic electronic instruments such as the Wurlitzer, MiniMoog, and electric violin. In this way, Ra’s balanced attention to tradition and technology (myth and science, past and future) has a way

of undermining the internal logics of reified musical genres. Skipping from boogie-woogie riffs, to overblown saxophone multiphonics, to electrified sine waves, Ra fashions a sonic world that mirrors his politics through its destabilization of racialized musical meanings. Ra's musical universe thus embodies his "Myth-Science" episteme. Indeed, his stage persona also reflected this seeming ambivalence through his donning of what is best described as Pharaonic space garb, consisting of brightly colored dashikis, Egyptian headdresses, and antennaed space helmets (see Fig. 2).

**[Insert Fig. 2 Here]**

Fig. 2—Sun Ra's Afrofuturist Garb

As the bandleader and his collective's name imply, Ra and the Arkestra drew heavily upon a mythologized vision of a Judeo-Egyptian past in which the tropes of exodus and rescue are recontextualized in an interplanetary future. Born Herman Poole Blount and nicknamed "Sonny" from early bandstand experiences, he legally changed his name to Le Sony'r Ra in 1952, dropping his inherited "slave name." After the change the composer and bandleader maintained that he was born on Saturn (Pekar, 7; Szwed, 29).<sup>vi</sup> Ra explains: "I left everything to be me, 'cause I knew I was not like them. Not like black or white, not like Americans... black people, they back there in the past, a past that somebody manufactured for 'em. It's not their past, it's not their history" (Eshun, 154-155). Ra's "Myth-Science Approach" to history thus draws upon the dialectical tension between a "manufactured" black



past and an equally overwritten white future. Just as Ra's life and music reflect a desire to reshape his past—and that of African Americans—his project also promotes a constant reimagining of the future by questioning the structures of supposed U.S. equality that yield realities that are hardly egalitarian. His shaping of a mythic past located in African civilization is part of a larger Afrofuturist mode of history making that disarticulates Africa from the totalizing narratives of oppression that threaten to represent blackness as a burden alone. Of these narratives Ra explains in A Joyful Noise: “that’s his-story, you haven’t heard my story.”

In the second section of “Myth Versus Reality (The Myth-Science Approach),” entitled “Angelic Proclamation,” Danny Davis says politely to the gathered audience: “We want to tell you about my home planet, Saturn.” He continues the “proclamation” quickly shifting from spoken language to a free solo on alto sax that winds through metallic sheets of overblown multiphonics—groaning and screaming timbres that stand in stark contrast to the cordial exposition of his extraterrestrial origins. After a battery of riotous percussion effects gradually join in the mayhem, and then abruptly subside, Davis continues: “You think you are human. Suppose you’ve made a mistake (as humans always do) and you’re an angel instead. But you shouldn’t make errors because I came to tell you: you are now citizens of the greater uni-verse. I don’t expect to be a citizen of this planet, it takes too long. So, I hereby proclaim you citizens of my greater uni-verse” [my emphasis]. As Davis finishes his introduction Ra enters with a free solo on MiniMoog—the oscillator-based futuristic keyboard instrument par excellence. Beginning with gently intertwining portamento sine waves the solo quickly grows frenetic as the clean lines grow distorted emulating a spaceship’s warm-up and eventual launch. Hollywood film studios had been using sine wave and oscillator instruments such as the Theremin and Ondes Martenot throughout the 1940s and 1950s to portray UFOs and extraterrestrial encounters, but no one before Ra used Robert Moog’s widely influential

synthesizer in such a wildly inventive manner. Notably, today the instrument has come to stand as something of an enduring symbol of the easy compatibility—if not interdependence—of soul and technology for both the disco and hip hop generations.

The piece “Myth Versus Reality (The Myth-Science Approach)” thus begins by helping the audience to question its reality, then offering them an alternative subjectivity, and finally launching the collection of new uni-versal citizens into space on Ra’s musical craft. In his 1974 feature-length film Space is the Place, Ra offers a dramatized version of this basic narrative at the heart of his larger Afrofuturist project. In a book of the same name Ra biographer John Szwed writes accurately of Space is the Place as: “part documentary, part science fiction, part blaxploitation, part revisionist biblical epic” (330). While the black exploitation film ambience, barely adequate budget, and committee written screenplay (including a handful of unnecessary sexist subplots) detract from the central liberating theme of the film, Space is the Place nonetheless delivers on a number of Ra’s political aims.

In one of the most poignant scenes of the film, Ra materializes in an Oakland, California youth center and describes his project to a group of highly dubious teenagers. Media scholar Nabeel Zuberi describes the scene at length in his article “The Transmolecularization of [Black] Folk: Space is the Place, Sun Ra and Afrofuturism.”

...we suddenly see Ra from a more objective point of view. He announces himself as an ambassador from the Intergalactic Council of Outer Space. Faced with some youthful skepticism about his authenticity and disparaging comments that he looks like an old hippy, Ra poses the rhetorical question, “How do you know I’m real?” The youths say “Yeah” inquisitively. Ra continues, “I’m not real. I’m just like you. You don’t exist in this society. If you did, your people wouldn’t be seeking equal rights. You’re not real. If you were, you’d have some status among the nations of the world.” Close ups of several of the youngsters show that his words

have been absorbed (88-89).

The central component of Ra's holistic Afrofuturist episteme is evident in the very material critique that he directs against U.S. (and global) concepts of citizenship. By noting that on Earth citizenship "takes too long" and challenging the Oakland youths to interrogate their place in an inequitable U.S. society Ra again expresses his disdain for the hypocrisy of white universalism.

Ra's poem "Freedom from Freedom" is another pointed encapsulation of his take on hollow liberal rhetoric.

"Freedom from Freedom"

From the liberty/Of the land/Where destruction's light/Is the land/

Freedom from the decree of freedom/From the liberty/Of the land of destruction/

Is the decree/That can truly save/Those whose freedom/Is a burden and a shame/

What price freedom that despairs?/What glory freedom that destroys? (2007)

Similarly, in another scene from the documentary film A Joyful Noise, Ra stands at the base of a twenty-foot tall Egyptian sphinx in the University of Pennsylvania's Natural History Museum. Here Ra echoes the distrust of liberal rhetoric in "Freedom from Freedom": "I myself am rising up above what they call liberty and what they call equality—and whatever man thinks is the greatest thing. I have to rise above that. So, I have to judge a tree by the fruit. I don't like what I see and I don't want to be a part of it." Despite his distrust of the next great ideas of Western progress and his seeming predilection for the mythical, magical, and mystical, here we get a glimpse of Ra the materialist.

If liberty, equality, and universalism are the solid foundations—the roots, trunk, and branches—of our democracy, then why should the fruit that it produces—racism and brutal inequity—be so strange and bitter.<sup>vii</sup> Perhaps, his remarkably comprehensive and consistent

cultural critique is more pragmatic than his literally outlandish behavior would indicate. Ra explains further: “We hold this myth to be potential. They hold their truths to be self-evident. Our myth is not self-evident because it is a mystery” (1980). For Ra, Enlightenment rationality, Western progress, and white supremacy are inseparable. They reflect only one narrow vision of the world and therefore could not possibly capture any real truth.

If Sun Ra established the core tenet of anti-anti-essentialist collapsed binaries in musical Afrofuturism, then George Clinton and Parliament-Funkadelic continued and amplified that futuristic tradition. Like the Arkestra, Parliament saw a direct linkage between their futuristic “mothership” and the ancient “secrets of the pyramids.” On their 1976 album The Clones of Dr. Funkenstein Parliament lays out its own myth-science approach as the concept album’s protagonist, Dr. Funkenstein (one of Clinton’s many alter-egos), welcomes the listener into his lab:

Once a funk upon a time, in the days of the funkapus, the concept of  
specially designed Afronauts capable of funkatizing galaxies was first  
laid on man-child but was later repossessed and placed among the secrets  
of the pyramids until a more positive attitude towards this most sacred  
phenomenon—clone the funk—could be acquired. There in these terrestrial  
projects it would wait, along with its coinhabitants of kings and pharaohs  
like sleeping beauties with a kiss that would release them to multiply....

The collapse of mythic past and future is self-evident here, with the update of the classic fairy tale anacrusis preparing the listener for a story of “sleeping beauties” and “secrets of the pyramids” side by side with “afronauts” and cloning. Indeed, the album’s narrative draws heavily on the Frankenstein story and the trope of the mad scientist—who is also somehow

magical—to locate a past truth in ancient Pharaonic Egypt that was “repossessed” for protection from the negativity of encroaching white civilization.

In drawing on the mad scientist archetype, the album also echoes Amiri Baraka’s play A Black Mass, a work based on Nation of Islam creation stories in which the black mad scientist Yacub breathes life into an evil white race. The basic story as first told by NOI founder Wallace Fard Muhammad or as reinterpreted by Jones was almost certainly known to George Clinton as it indeed was to the Chicago-based Ra (Szwed, 132; Baraka, 1999).<sup>viii</sup> Notably, however, in their takes on this black myth-science both Ra and Parliament purge the story of its wholesale demonization of the white race. As Zuberi writes of Ra’s use of this NOI creation myth: “Though he didn’t subscribe to its cosmology... these [and other] texts made their way into Ra’s mythical lexicography” (80). Similarly, rather than emphasizing a Manichean battle between good blacks and evil whites as in the original myth or in Jones’s controversial Black Arts Movement work, Parliament’s version of the black mad scientist is a more conciliatory figure—and perhaps most importantly, a more playful one.

On the title track of the 1975 album Chocolate City, Clinton slyly expresses his dissent from the unfulfilled promises and structural racism of our liberal democracy. The track begins hopefully, echoing Ra’s thoughts from A Joyful Noise: “What’s happening CC [Chocolate City]? They still call it the White House but that’s a temporary condition, too. Can you dig it, CC?” Later on the track Clinton continues: “We didn’t get our forty acres and a mule but we did get you, CC. Gainin’ on ya. Movin’ in and around ya. God bless CC and its vanilla suburbs.” And on the 1976 album Mothership Connection Clinton begrudgingly but jokingly gives a degree of credit to other funk musicians, both black and white, musing on the tune “P. Funk (Wants to Get Funked Up)”: “Hey I was diggin’ on y’all’s funk for a while. Sounds like it got a three on it though, to me. Then I was down south and I heard some funk with some main ingredients like Doobie Brothers, Blue Magic, David Bowie. It was cool, but

can you imagine Doobie in your funk? Ho!”

As with Ra, the articulation of past and future myths as well as the inherent critique of the liberal rationality of the present are essential to Parliament’s episteme. Indeed, Clinton uses Ra’s language of “citizens of the universe” on Mothership Connection bypassing the historically restricted citizenship of planet Earth. In addition, the narratives of abduction and exodus inform Clinton’s Afrofuturism as body snatchers appear and we hear choruses of “swing down sweet chariot, stop and let me ride.” The inspiration for Clinton’s “Mothership” concept for the album was likely also inspired by black Islamic teachings that held a select group of black people are in fact superhuman and will be saved from Earth by a “mothership” as the white race perishes in flames.

Opting out of this divisive ideology, however, Clinton’s Parliament again adopts a symbol of black separatism while undermining its most divisive aspects through playful articulation to the decidedly anti-civilized imagery of the character “Sir Lollipop Man,” the outrageous stage shows featuring space costumes, and a giant UFO mothership (behind Clinton in Fig. 1) as well as the commonly diapered vocalist/guitarist Garry Shider. Through their staging, costumes, and narratives of “extraterrestrial brothers, dealers of funky music” and “terrestrial projects” Parliament develops characters that Kodwo Eshun fittingly describes as “Spacepimps” (139). By reconfiguring and redeploying ethnocentric markers in ironic ways Clinton balanced his critique of white supremacy with a healthy suspicion of black nationalism. As Ra’s formulation of the word “Arkestra” combines the primordial mythic vessel with the iconicity of European high art music, Clinton’s “Parliament-Funkadelic” collapses the central symbol of Western democracy onto a signifier of drug-laced black soul. Clinton, like Ra before him, seeks a symbolic escape from the politics of the ossified dualities embodied in these terms.

It is on Mothership Connection that Parliament first introduces their Afrofuturistic concept of P-Funk—a concept that resonates with Weheliye’s “hypersoul.” While the funk idea captures the musical idea of black soul, P-Funk—derived from the Parliament-Funkadelic moniker—amplifies, electronifies, and futurizes that soul. As Eshun describes from the opposite/parallel (as Ra would have it) perspective: “P-Funk personifies the nonhuman force of media” (138). P-Funk is therefore an update of Ra’s Myth-Science—a sort of hyper-mediatized techno-soul.

In a calm, reassuring, and measured voice, Clinton introduces the listener to P-Funk on the tune “P. Funk (Wants to Get Funked Up)”:

Good evening. Do not attempt to adjust your radio. There is nothing wrong. We have taken control as to bring you this special show. We will return it to You as soon as you are grooving. Welcome to station W-E-F-U-N-K, better known as We Funk or deeper still the Mothership Connection. Home of the extraterrestrial brothers, dealers of funky music—P-Funk, uncut funk, the bomb. Coming to you directly from the Mothership. Top of the chocolate milky way. Five hundred thousand kilowatts of P-Funk power. So kick back, dig, while we do it to you in your eardrums. Oh, me? I’m know as Lollipop Man. Alias “the long haired sucker.”

As the cool, low-level background groove builds to a climax, Lollipop Man introduces his “motto” which is suddenly and emphatically sung in a chorus of: “Make my funk the P-Funk....” The now heavy groove continues as Bootsy Collins’s signature “space bass”—a star-shaped electric bass played through a Mu-Tron III envelope filter (see Fig. 3)—emerges, percolating up in blips and growls from the broader musical texture provided by Bernie Worrell’s keyboards and Maceo Parker and Fred Wesley’s “Horny Horns.”

In his study of the role of the vocoder effect in R&B “‘Feenin’: Posthuman Voices in Contemporary Black Popular Music” Weheliye notes that such technologies “that render the human voice robotic” are in fact quite compatible with our ingrained notions of soulfulness (22). Similarly, the processor through which Bootsy’s bass tones move not only modulates the frequencies of the original sound waves, but also somehow amplifies the funk in his countermelodic bass lines. Gilroy has indicated some misgivings about the effects of such electronic mediation and digital technologies on soulfulness, but his primary concerns regard the potential for these technologies to take the place of human musical proficiency (1998). Rather than displacing or attenuating the soul of Bootsy’s musicianship as we might postulate a technological middleman would, the little futuristic blinking knobbed device catapults the musical soul to another level. The undeniable funkiness of Bootsy’s Mu-Tron—like Jimi Hendrix’s wah pedal and Zapp’s vocoder—underscores this unexpected synergy of soul and science that we might fittingly describe as “hyperfunk.”

**[Insert Fig. 3 Here]**

Fig. 3—Bootsy Collins with cheetah skin suit and hyperfunky “Space Bass.” Courtesy of Bass Player magazine. Original image ©Berry Behrendt.

As former members of James Brown’s band Collins, Parker, and Wesley were as well schooled as anyone in soul and funk, but their work on the 1970s Parliament-Funkadelic albums created an entirely new sound. While the duo of Parker and Wesley provided the horn arrangements in much the same punchy and syncopated style as they had while performing with the JBs, the pairing with Collins’s now virtuostically spaced out style and



Worrell's complement of synthesized keyboard sounds gave Parliament a uniquely hyper-funky sound. The "five hundred thousand kilowatts" that Clinton describes in "P. Funk" juice the funk and give it its hyper-technologized sensibility. Just as Ellison's invisible man multiplied Louis Armstrong's soul five times over on phonographs, Parliament produces its P-Funk by hyper-amplifying, cloning, and otherwise electronically replicating the funk. In this way Parliament's music and space-age stage personae aesthetically embodied the legacy of Afrofuturist thought for the disco era. Furthermore, their profoundly successful engagement with technology and technological discourses of progress helped to destabilize the fallacious dualism of white technology and black soul.

Kool Keith, a founding member of the early hip hop group Ultramagnetic MCs, is an increasingly influential Afrofuturist artist today who embodies the dialectics of Sun Ra and George Clinton. It is his cyber-incantation of "robot voodoo power" that best represents the Afrofuturist lineage of Ra's Myth-Science and Parliament's P-Funk. On the 1997 Dr. Octagon album the eponymous protagonist (Keith) raps of his return to Earth and to the past from the year 3000. He describes his time-traveling medical space expedition over a Casio retro-synth beat with turntable scratches by DJ Q-Bert on the tune "Earth People":

First patient, pull out the skull remove the cancer.

Breaking his back, chisel necks for the answer.

Supersonic, bionic, robot voodoo power.

Equator ex, my chance to flex skills on Ampex.

With power meters and heaters gauge antifreeze.

Octagon, oxygen, aluminum intoxicants.

More ways to blow blood cells in your face.

React with four bombs and six fire missiles.

Armed with seven rounds of space doo-doo pistols.

You may not believe livin' on the Earth planet.

My skin is green and silver, bald head lookin' mean.

Astronauts get played tough like a ukelele.

As I'm movin' rockets, overriding levels.

Nothing's aware. Same data, same system.

(Controlled by Gammalyte)

Earth people: New York and California.

Earth People: I was born on Jupiter. [my emphasis]

Although Dr. Octagon was born one planet closer to Earth than Sun Ra—and uses a fax machine for transportation instead of an ark or mothership—he shares the Afrofuturist dismissal of Earth as a galactic backwater unable to imagine the beyond through its rational ideology.

At the same time, however, the power of Keith's Afrofuturist episteme is its insistence on the ridiculousness of the myths that U.S. media have constructed about the future. His mention of a ukelele in the same breath as astronauts makes sense in the context of the album as it highlights the 1950s sci-fi craze that accompanied a simultaneous Hawaiian craze in the U.S. Like Tracy Morgan's image of a black astronaut crooning with a guitar under his arm and holding a highball, Kool Keith pokes fun at fifties-era whiteness just as he critiques the dearth of representations of black people in space. Similarly, the robotic (white) female voice that begins the tune by announcing: "paging Dr. Octagon. Code blue in sector nineteen" is taken right from film and television conventions of ironically soothing sci-fi voices that announce imminent destruction (e.g. "this ship will self-destruct in 10 seconds"). While his aesthetic of over-saturation and ironic juxtaposition comes off as nearly indecipherable, the logic of his pastiche is striking. His "robot voodoo power" collapses

futuristic white myths upon primitivistic black ones in order to critique both stereotyped media images.

Unlike Fredric Jameson's now-famous description of postmodernism as pastiche emptied of its critical power—or “blank parody”—Keith's postmodernism is marked as oppositional despite its seeming inanity and playfulness (1983). Indeed, his critique extends not just to the white anti-authentic but to the black hyper-authentic. On his 1999 concept album Black Elvis/Lost in Space, Keith swims in disembodied racial signifiers but maintains a coherent position against simplistic racial formulations. As the title implies, Keith is bringing racial fantasies full circle in donning the alter ego of “Black Elvis” (see Fig. 1). Here his character is of course a black man acting like a white man acting like a black man. But he is not just another impersonator without a cause, but an artist who knows something about the histories of authenticity, appropriation, and race in American popular music.

On the “Intro” to the album Keith questions a hardcore, hyper-masculine B-Boy too indulged in his fictional “keepin’ it real” poses. He asks: “Why are you looking hard with a hood on and Timberland boots...? Why are you making those mean faces in your videos with the fish lens effect...? Why are you smirking up your face making obnoxious facial scenes, like I supposed to be scared?” With regard to Keith's consistent criticism of commercialized gangsta (“Trad”) rap personae, Eshun writes: “Kool Keith replaces HipHop's Trad voice armour with a highly strung hauteur, an extreme sarcasm pointed with malicious precision at Trad HipHop's sanctified stupidities, an extreme aversion to its familiar fixations” (39). Just as Sun Ra's statement that “I knew I was not like them. Not like black or white” Keith rejects monolithic conceptions of blackness and whiteness while retaining an irreducibly complex black (op)positionality.<sup>ix</sup> Most importantly, Keith's brilliant full-circle formulation of Black Elvis echoes the double negative of Gilroy's anti-anti-essentialism. The figure of Black Elvis simultaneously critiques a reified essential black masculinity while

maintaining that an anti-essentialist argument runs the risk of freeing Elvis's appropriation—and white appropriation at large—from criticism.

Although Keith does not look to Pharaonic Egypt to locate his mysticism as with Ra and Parliament, he does share a position in the inner city “terrestrial projects” with George Clinton's P-Funk. On a track replete with the electronic wah effects and female background singers of 1970s black exploitation films, *Black Elvis* (Keith) raps: “(Chorus: Supergalactic lover.) Comin’ from the projects on the hill. (Chorus: Supergalactic lover.) In my monkey-green ragtop Seville.” The funky “Spacepimp” sexuality of “Supergalactic Lover” stands in direct contrast with “Rockets on the Battlefield,” a prior track on which Keith performs the asexual techno-banter of a sci-fi space captain: “raising levels Jim... moving levers up at seven decimal eight.” That both are media constructions seem all too obvious to Keith.

In the opening tableau of the Doctor Octagon concept album, the doctor clad in “white suit and stethoscope” admits he is “just a man” to a sultry sounding female nurse. The scene soon reveals itself as a mock-pornography skit as the good doctor confesses that he has “needs”—and the skit degenerates from there. While decidedly “off color” and potentially offensive, the skit is telling in its use of the doctor character as a man whose professional life has garnered him a capacity for superhuman emotional distance—a capacity that inevitably fails. Despite its crass humor, however, the skit does real political work in its recognition that as a society we invest in the idea that certain positions of power are somehow superhuman. The simple image of “white suit and stethoscope” and mention of “professional ethics” bring into focus the caricature of a man in power who must nonetheless suppress his sexuality for the sake of his profession—a man who must be “above it all.”

On “Blue Flowers,” the hit track from the album, Keith's producer Dan “The Automator” Nakamura provides an ingenious beat featuring an incessant loop of the main

theme from Béla Bartók's 1938 violin concerto over a bass-heavy hip hop drum track before shifting into a virtuostic scratch solo by DJ Q-Bert. Keith enters with the lines:

Dr. Octagon paramedic fetus of the East  
 With priests I'm from the Church of the Operating Room  
 With the strike support scalpels since the Holocaust  
 I do indeed in greed explore meet the patients  
 Back to brooms with the nurse with the voodoo curse  
 Holding up office lights standing at huge heights  
 Back and forth left wing swing to North  
 East and South with blood pouring down your mouth  
 I come prepared with the white suit and stethoscope  
 Listen to your heartbeat, delete beep beep beep  
 Your insurance is high, but my price is cheap  
 Look at the land... Blue Flowers!

On "Blue Flowers" Keith explores his character, the cut-rate and decidedly creepy "orthopedic gynecologist," in more depth. The character's subtle hints at necrophilial intent on the track are reinforced on the tune's video, which also echoes Keith's penchant for floating signifiers. We catch brief glimpses of autopsy footage and Aztec petroglyphs, World War II archival film and medieval Christian artworks, circuitry and skeletons as they whiz by in a barrage of fuzzy succession and individual white letters fall like snow in the foreground.

Especially notable is a somewhat extended camera shot that anticipates Keith's work on Black Elvis in which a character in blackface (either Q-Bert or Keith himself) emerges in sunglasses and backwards cap grinning ear to ear. The seemingly disparate visual elements of the video suddenly snap into focus as Keith rehistoricizes himself in a complex lineage of "black" entertainers through this pastiche aesthetic. Sonically, the foregrounding of the fluid

but foreboding Bartók violin theme on the track reminds us all the while of the doctor's corrupted medical ethics as a sort of orchestral beauty gone awry—a signifier of untouchable high art brought down into the debased world of low brow street music. Similarly, on a later skit between tracks we hear an advertisement for the “Offices of Dr. Octagon” where Pachelbel's ubiquitous Canon in D major provides the soundtrack for the doctor's list of questionable—and certainly unethical—specialty surgeries.

It is the surplus of signification that Keith engages in that gives his cultural critique such power. As the number of sounds and images reaches a critical mass the logic that maintains the stability of these polarized media signifiers buckles under the weight of their supposed meanings. Remarkably, these sound bites and screen shots are simultaneously exposed as simplistic stand-ins for real engagement and rebuilt into a liberating way out of the dualistic bind. In short, this Afrofuturist destabilization has a hyper-signified message—it clears the way to an ambivalent unity. The anachronistic simultaneity of robots and voodoo, rockets and ukeleles, Bartók and Q-Bert, and of course the brilliantly stupid “space doo-doo pistols” provides Keith with the metaphors for challenging myths of past and future. The tension produced by collapsing the fantasies/fallacies of black superstition and white science fiction one onto the other creates a powerful weapon with which to reflect the deformed irrationality of these visions back onto the rationalized “universalist” society that created them. Thus, Keith's construction of “robot voodoo power” seems a fitting encapsulation of his Afrofuturist cultural critique and a succinct representation of the potential inherent in the larger Afrofuturist project.

### **Conclusions: The Tree and The Fruit**

Does the fact that Sun Ra opted out of humanity in the mid-1950s just as the civil rights movement was gaining steam in the U.S. cast him as a race traitor? Do Parliament's

overindulgent “Spacepimps” undermine the project of racial equality? Can Keith’s “Black Elvis” be considered anything more than a postmodern joke? In short, are Myth-Science, P-Funk, and Robot Voodoo Power signs of resignation and hopeless fantasy or “real” answers that have meaning in the material world—a world that cannot seem to escape the perpetuation of racism?

I would like to assert that they do have real political efficacy because they problematize the rigid binary of blackness/whiteness and the matrix of binaries that are inscribed upon this central set. Remarkably, Afrofuturism performs this destabilization from a staunchly oppositional position that is decidedly black because it is rooted in the historical reality of white universalist racism and continuously works against that history. While Du Bois advises African Americans to maintain their race identity until the U.S. meets them on their terms, the Afrofuturists diversify blackness while recuperating Du Bois’s steadfastness. As Sun Ra explained: “I have to judge a tree by the fruit. I don’t like what I see and I don’t want to be a part of it.” The materialist foundations of this seemingly idealist project are nowhere more evident.

I would argue that the broadly defined Afrofuturist project takes its lead from this position. Although Afrofuturism draws on tropes of exodus and seems to promote an escape from reality, it instead does very real social and cultural work. Afrofuturism is itself a mode of meaning making and historical production that navigates, counters, and ultimately transcends the history of African American oppression while retaining a critical blackness. While Afrofuturist dialectics recognize myths and collapse ossified binaries into dynamic unities the episteme is grounded in its material opposition to white racist universalism. By stepping outside of the white liberal tradition and rewriting blackness in all its complexity Afrofuturism offers a novel form of revolution that is rooted in a long history of black opposition.

Indeed, the Afrofuturist project speaks to a very broad group of people and a broad range of material issues. The AfroFuturism listserve itself has over three hundred members and the music, literature, art, drama, and sports that are discussed in that forum reach countless millions. The recent success of Gnarls Barkley—the critically acclaimed collaboration of Cee-Lo and Danger Mouse—is indicative of Afrofuturism’s continued popular appeal. On the track “Transformer,” Cee-Lo speaks from the perspective of a “microchip off the old block,” an identity shifting robot who echoes De La Soul’s “I Am I Be,” rapping: “I’m just being myself / Plus I gotta be me too / Silly of me to think that / I couldn’t bring myself to be you.” Reporting on an August 2006 concert in New York’s Central Park Billboard.com’s Michael Ayers wrote of the group:

What seemingly was a one-off side project has turned into mega-success, and will probably carry them right into Grammy nods galore.

But on this night, the Gnarls camp was in good spirits and celebrating a newly confirmed platinum award for 1 million U.S. shipments of its debut, “St. Elsewhere.” Part of the Gnarls Barkley shtick is their playful identity, where they never really assume themselves, but instead riff on past popular culture entities.

Notably, this “shtick” is in fact part of a larger movement that employs the past to envision new futures. Yet, whether critics or fans conceive of Afrofuturist culture as such seems beside the point. By engaging people in an active appreciation of such fantastic visions, Afrofuturism primes the mind and body to both imagine and live in a world apart from that depicted in the rationalized histories of Western civilization. Perhaps just as importantly, the visibility of Afrofuturism in the African American artistic canon should offer some sense of the power of this project. Thoughtful authors such as Ellison, Baraka, and Ishmael Reed, brilliant artists such as Basquiat, Fatimah Tuggar, and the increased scholarly attention to street art in addition to the countless musicians that are most visible in the field all attest to Afrofuturism’s political and material power.



It is no mistake that the Afrofuturist critique makes its case most poignantly in the realm of the arts, for aesthetic creation bypasses the strictures of rhetorical logic in favor of an embodied position. For the literary and cultural theorist Fred Moten the experience of double consciousness is intimately tied to the bifurcations and ruptures of Enlightenment thought and its central mind/body binary. As he argues in his In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition black artistic performance holds the potential of expressing an imminent critique of Western rationality and its systems of meaning from an embodied position. Afrofuturism is in this regard a decidedly materialist rather than idealist project. Indeed, the “break” that he speaks of is first and foremost a recognition of the rupture between language and the speech act that provides a site of opposition—a place where counter-meanings can be constructed and (white) rationality can be critiqued. Moten writes: “This disruption of the Enlightenment linguistic project is of fundamental importance since it allows a rearrangement of the relationship between notions of human freedom and notions of human essence” (7).

Moten uses Frederick Douglass’s reminiscence about his Aunt Hester’s scream upon being beaten by her white slave master as a nexus upon which to focus his examination of the multiple valences of the break. Here, the central bifurcation that he highlights is actually a sutured rupture between the human and commodity. It is a mended break embodied in Aunt Hester’s screaming voice and her corollary in Marx’s figure of the “speaking commodity” from Capital, Vol. 1. Marx writes: “Nevertheless the table continues to be wood, an ordinary, sensuous thing. But as soon as it emerges as a commodity, it changes into a thing which transcends sensuousness... it stands on its head, and evolves out of its wooden brain grotesque ideas, far more wonderful than if it were to begin dancing of its own free will” (163). Marx continues in a later passage: “If commodities could speak they would say this: our use-value may interest men, but it does not belong to us as objects. What does belong to us as objects, however, is our value. Our own intercourse as commodities proves it” (176).

Moten's point, of course, is that Marx has one thing wrong here. Commodities do speak. Aunt Hester's scream proves it. That Marx's humanized commodity figure does not make sense reveals the fundamental flaw of the Enlightenment project. By the rules of Western subjectivity she/it should not exist, but we know she/it does exist because of the horribly embodied scream—and moreover because she/it does think, because she/it does dance, because she/it does make love.

Further citing Marx, Moten argues for the performativity of the scream that: "It is a passion wherein 'the senses have... become theoreticians in their immediate practice.' The commodity whose speech sounds embodies the critique of value, of private property, of the sign" (11-12). Here Moten brilliantly illustrates that Marx's speaking commodity and the Hegelian Master/Slave dialectic are much more than metaphorical tools, they embody the historically violent realities of Western systems of signification. In short, he illustrates the centrality of slavery to Enlightenment universalism and lays bare the processes by which the mind/body split was accomplished through the subjugation of the black body. Here we see that the anomaly of the speaking commodity is a 'theoretician in immediate practice.' Thus, Moten argues that the black radical aesthetic has become the critical—the artistic has become the scholarly—through its very existence and resistance. Indeed, he challenges the formal strictures of (white) scholarly discourse by delivering his argument in In the Break as a sort of poetic internal dialogue rather than in the pseudo-objective style of conventional scholarly writing.

It is this disjuncture or "break"—the glaring anomaly of material racism at the heart of ideal universalism—that is seized upon by Afrofuturist critiques of Western rationalism and its white supremacy. Sun Ra, George Clinton, and Kool Keith embody their critique through the sights, sounds, and movements of their interplanetary presences and therefore move past the written rhetoric that has upheld the fallacies of liberty and equality—"rising up above

what they call liberty and what they call equality” as Ra put it. Their very voices are an immanent critique of the Western hegemony of signification. In times such as these when the words “democracy” and “freedom” ring empty—when they are broken from their emancipatory potential by self-interested military industrialists and when declarations of “humanitarian crises” are based more on considerations of race, class, and power than the universal value of human life it seems that we might look for alternatives to this ancient and now co-opted rhetoric. Cast by slaveholders and forged in the fires of colonialism this ossified ideology no longer moves people.

By contrast Ra, Clinton, and Keith also avoid the essentializing pitfalls of ethnic nationalism while recovering its emotional and embodied assets. These Afrofuturists do not subscribe to the narratives of scientific progress that forecast an end to ethnic nationalisms and racial strife nor do they see the current vision of a race-free future as a place they wish to live. But they are no more interested in a return to an idyllic, primordial, and racially pure motherland. Surely, no place will ever, nor has ever, existed. Instead, through their art Ra, Clinton, Keith, and a host of others involved in Afrofuturist and anti-anti-essentialist projects are working toward a place and time in which this polarized vision no longer makes any sense. And in a typically playful manner, they are all the while laughing at the very thought of such simplistically dualistic human notions. The Afrofuturist strategy thus carves out a new emancipatory potential—a fantastic but ethical anti-anti-essentialist third way—by recovering the hope of the future and the solidarity of the past.

### **Discography/Videography**

De La Soul. Buhloonic Mind State. Tommy Boy (1993).

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<sup>i</sup> Although the online forum is titled "AfroFuturism," the common usage is now "Afrofuturism."

<sup>ii</sup> I refer here to the "prologue/denouement" since the narrative of the novel begins from the perspective of a flashback and comes to an end in a re-arrival at that flashpoint.

<sup>iii</sup> Gilroy describes this update of Jones's central argument that is laid out in Blues People and further developed in Black Music as follows: "I believe it is possible to approach the music as a changing

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rather than unchanging same. Today, this involves the difficult task of striving to comprehend the reproduction of cultural traditions not in the unproblematic transmission of a fixed essence through time but in the breaks and interruptions that suggest that the invocation of tradition may itself be a distinct, though covert, response to the destabilizing flux of the postcontemporary world.”

<sup>iv</sup> I refer to Ra’s “episteme” throughout this discussion to highlight the dynamic nature of his knowledge making rather than the ontological or metaphysical implications of his being or human subjectivity.

<sup>v</sup> It is worth comment here that Ra uses “parallel” and “opposite” as synonyms since his understanding of opposites is so dialectical and mutually constitutive.

<sup>vi</sup> Ra is also quoted in Szwed’s exhaustive biography as backdating his transformation to a childhood abduction experience.

<sup>vii</sup> Here, I am of course referencing Billy Holiday’s signature song “Strange Fruit.” Although my intent here is to highlight the intertextuality of the two statements, the metaphors of both are unfortunately historically inseparable in the context of American racism.

<sup>viii</sup> For a description of Ra’s exposure to NOI ideology see Szwed. Ra set Baraka’s play to music in 1965 at the Black Arts Repertory Theater School, but as Baraka notes Ra was engaged only marginally in black nationalist movements writing: “...the Black Arts experience added a more openly Black nationalist edge to Ra’s actually scientific philosophical musings on the Universe.”

<sup>ix</sup> For a succinct critique of monolithic conceptions of black culture see Kelley, “Looking for the Real Nigga,” 17-19.