

Chronopolitics in a minor key: Afrofuturism and social death

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Abstract: In this article, I map some of the philosophical implications of that collection of aesthetic practices grouped under the moniker of “Afrofuturism” since Mark Dery’s first deployment of the term in 1993. In so doing, I advance several (inter)related theses. First, that aesthetic philosophy should look to Afrofuturism for a model of emancipatory political art, such as it supposes lost with the high modernism of the 20th century. Second, that Afrofuturist cultural production consists in a critical destabilisation of hegemonic teleologies, thereby constituting a “chronopolitical” aesthetics. And finally, following Deleuze and Guattari, that Afrofuturism opens up the space for reflection on a “minoritarian” politics, such as might replace traditional Marxist accounts of class antagonism, and help us to reformulate strategies of resistance to globalised capitalism, which are so sorely needed today.

Keywords: Afrofuturism; Gilles Deleuze; art.

“Free your mind and your ass will follow.” –Funkadelic

“Our shit is beyond the people who are trying to define it.”
–Lester Bowie

Academic writing about “black”¹ American aesthetic culture poses problems for even the most delicate and erudite of commentators, both black and white. This culture has, after all, tended to emerge in necessary opposition to a dominant *dispositif* of racialized (white) power, of which academic writing has formed a significant intellectual buttress. Indeed, even in its most ostensibly

¹ This term will be used in full awareness of its problematic nature, as the locus of a “Black Power” to be valorised, at the same time as being, in Fumi Okiji’s words “a category used to control people of African descent and a marker of the outer limit of what can be considered human” (2018: 3).

“emancipatory” dispositions, critique in the Eurocentric mode has tended to slip into those denials of the specificity of black agency animating Adorno’s writings on jazz,² which, as Fumi Okiji has noted (2018: 12), spectacularly fail to grasp the complex critical and structural play this artform instigates. Even in more apparently “generous” academic investigations, the very attempt to fix and to define concepts proper to black aesthetics often finds its analogue in the mapping of geographical territories for the purposes of colonisation and the exploitation of resources – be they vegetal, mineral or human. In this context, the resistant cultural codifications of enslaved and hitherto enslaved peoples³ are once more recuperated as surplus value and intellectual capital by those same masters who have always reaped the rewards of this arrangement.

Further still, academic discussion in this space is often redundant. Contra Hegel’s thesis of a gradual subordination of art to a materially unencumbered thought proper to philosophy, the fusions, grooves, syntheses, mixes and breaks of 20th and 21st century black sonic culture perhaps already constitute materialised conceptual machineries more properly implicated in the problematics of late-capital than any theory being written today. As Kodwo Eshun has written, maybe theory can only try to play catch-up:

Producers are already pop theorists: Breakbeat producer Sonz of a Loop da Loop Era’s term *skcratchadelia*, instrumental HipHop producer DJ Krush’s idea of *turtnabilixiation*, virtualizer George Clinton’s studio science of *mixadelics*, all these concepttechnics are used to excite theory to travel at the speed of thought, as sonic theorist Kool Keith suggested in 1987 (1998: 00[-004]).

In other words, a still hermetically sealed academy –both in terms of its demographic make-up and in terms of its preparedness to experiment with alternate modes of thought– can only ever secondarily encounter a productively disturbing “mix” of temporalities, concepts and sensations experienced directly through the nervous system of the listener, DJ or dancer of 21st century capitalism.

With these important caveats in mind, I intend nevertheless to proceed, mapping some of the conceptual affects which emerge from that collection of cultural tendencies grouped under the moniker of “Afrofuturism” since the first use of the term by (white) scholar Mark Dery (1994). My hope in so doing

² See Adorno (1990).

³ Important to note, in the context of any discussion of the “legacy” of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, is not only the fact that there more slaves globally, today, than at any time in human history (Global Slavery Index 2018), but also, in Michelle Alexander’s words, the fact that “more African American adults are under correctional control today -in prison or jail, on probation or parole- that were enslaved in 1850, a decade before the Civil War began” (2012: 180).

is to assist in opening up a new pathway for academic reflection on “art,” a term which we may not ultimately be justified in rescuing from its bourgeois usage— designating the auratic (valuable) objects of genius (male) creators.⁴

In keeping with Walter Benjamin’s thesis, of a potential democratisation of art in the context of mechanical reproduction (2008: 19-20), I will argue that the Afrofuturist paradigm provides aesthetic philosophy with a model of *socially immanent* aesthetic invention, in opposition to the model of “art” it still largely favours – conceived as the reified objects of a “culture,” somehow removed from the quotidian or commercial real. At the same time, I will claim that Afrofuturism inherits the modernist orientation of its European namesake, advancing a politicised futurity devoted to speculations around material and technological emancipation. But whereas the Italian futurists remained mired in a white supremacist imaginary which fetishized both violent masculinity and war, Afrofuturist “chronopolitics” provides us a model of temporal speculation wedded to “minority” struggles, which I follow Deleuze and Guattari in arguing constitute the descendants of class struggle in a post-industrial or informatic age. As such, in addition to sketching out the ways in which Afrofuturism might work to contaminate and deterritorialize dominant tropes in the philosophy of art, I will close this paper with a brief discussion of the Deleuzo-Guattarian concept of “minor literature,” suggesting some of the linkages between Afrofuturist thought –both theoretical and sonic– and the project to reinstate in art the tentative aspirations to an emancipatory politics.

1. *Introducing Afrofuturism*

Dery’s neologism, according to his original formulation, designates, “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...” (1994: 180). This is a good place to start, however the term designates both theoretical and aesthetic innovations spreading much further than fiction, and crystallising much earlier than Dery’s discussions with Samuel R. Delany, Greg Tate and Tricia Rose. Indeed “year zero” of the Afrofuturist paradigm constitutes a constantly receding horizontal object, properly in keeping with the temporal destabilisations which –as we will see– constitute perhaps its richest conceptual affect. A number of commentators (Eshun 2003; Anderson and Jones 2016; van Veen 2016) have traced it to a comprehensive articulation by Mark Sinker in *The Wire* in

⁴ For more on the association of maleness and the cult of “genius” see Battersby (1994).

1992.⁵ We might more adequately date its emergence to the voyage taken by the young pianist Herman Poole Blount to Saturn in around 1936 (Szwed: 29-32), such as would provoke him to embark upon a lifetime of futurist sonic experimentation under the moniker Sun Ra. We will return to this extraordinary event shortly.

Dery's definition is certainly helpful in identifying the key axioms which characterise Afrofuturist production, which can be usefully theorised via the black/future/technology thematic triad. This conceptual nexus captures a bewildering diversity of projects, from the sci-fi novels of Octavia Butler, Samuel Delaney and Nalo Hopkinson, the cultural criticism of Greg Tate, Kodwo Eshun and Alondra Nelson, the paintings of Jean-Michel Basquiat and Angelbert Metoyer, to the music and aesthetics of Jimi Hendrix, George Clinton and Parliament-Funkadelic, Derrick May, Lee "Scratch" Perry, Rammellzee, Kool Keith/Dr. Octagon, Public Enemy and many, many more. Films with distinctly Afrofuturist themes and aesthetics include Lizzie Borden's *Born in Flames* (1983), Sun Ra and John Coney's *Space is the Place* (1974) and more recently, Ryan Coogler's Hollywood blockbuster *Black Panther* (2018), which saw Afrofuturist aesthetics break through into mainstream Hollywood production.

In music too, recent projects like those of Janelle Monáe have seen explicitly Afrofuturistic ideas transposed into mainstream, chart success, while the traces of an Afrofuturist aesthetic are tangible in the musical and stylistic approaches of major recording artists like Solange, Beyoncé and Rihanna. This musical imbrication of black and "futuristic" aesthetics arguably stretches much further, characterising the vast majority of black American music produced in the 21st century, which has increasingly eschewed analogue techniques and acoustic musical instruments in favour of the synthesizer, the sampler, the digital mixing desk and the drum machine—creating the generalised "futuristic" soundscape which characterises contemporary popular music. Thematically, these are works which implicate black identity with advanced technology and some of the classical concerns of science fiction—alienness, cybernetics, space-and-time-travel, utopian and dystopian speculation, a constellation of terms captured, at times uncomfortably, under the rubric of "futurism."

At first glance, this marriage between black culture and futurism may seem an odd one. Futurism, after all, in its conventional deployment by aesthetic philosophers, refers to that collection of European avant-garde movements of the early 20th century, dedicated to a valorisation of speed, violence, mechanisation and technological "progress," which—at least in its Italian variation—was closely linked to the fascism of Benito Mussolini. Transposed, in the mid-

⁵ See Sinker (1992).

twentieth century, to describe the work of various “future forecasters” in the pay of the US military-industrial-complex, alongside the work of sci-fi writers like Isaac Asimov and Phillip K. Dick, the term feels distant from the structurally disadvantaged realities of many African Americans.

However, on closer inspection, the links between futurism and the black American experience are manifold. After all, as thinkers like Frank B. Wilderson (2017) and Charles Mills (1997) have suggested, the modern project and its ancillary notions of “progress” are perhaps instigated with the colonisation of the New World and the attendant establishment of the trans-Atlantic slave trade. And while the economic contribution of unpaid African labour contributed to the conditions of material affluence which would propel forward the European and American Enlightenments, for the 12-13 million Africans transported as slaves across the Atlantic (Segal 1995: 4), the violent experience of the “middle passage,” saw them, in Toni Morrison’s words “deal[ing] with post-modern problems in the nineteenth century and earlier” (Quoted in Gilroy 1993: 178).

Think: to be violently kidnapped by raiding parties wielding the most advanced weapons systems existent, to be uprooted from family, kin and territory, and thrown into a matrix composed of unprecedented and unthinkable technologies of power –to use an appropriately Foucauldian term– from leg-irons to sextants, sterilisations to accounting ledgers. In these conditions of terrifying modernity, thrust across the globe in an intercontinental trajectory then-unknown to almost all Europeans, Kodwo Eshun writes:

They underwent real conditions of existential homelessness, alienation, dislocation, and dehumanization 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 (2003: 288).

This modernity, indeed, was predicated on what Wilderson –adapting a term of Orlando Patterson’s (1982)– will describe as the “social death” of African people, their (non)entry into Western society on the condition of the concerted and deliberate obliteration of culture, language, family and tradition. Social death, in Wilderson’s formulation, refers to that process –of the utmost necessity in order for slavery to function in ostensibly “Christian” moral spheres– whereby enslaved individuals were not only excluded from white society (legally, scientifically, ontologically), but were also purged of their own cultural roots through the consistent dispersal of language groups, separation of families and prohibitions on continued cultural practices. In other words,

in order for a human being to become a slave, this entity had to *no longer be human*, becoming rather a fungible object which is “dead” from the point of view of the socius— a deadness which Wilderson will argue persists in the concept of “blackness” today (2017: 20).⁶ Social death would become a primary enabling condition for the globalised economic and technological domination of the United States of America –culminating in that most paradigmatically “futural” event, the Apollo 11 moon landing— the strange fruit of an affluence built from its very beginnings on the unpaid labour of slaves, both before and after the Emancipation Proclamation. But the horrors of a techno-modernist social death would have other, perhaps less predictable consequences.

As a number of commentators have noted, the tactic of a deliberate erasure of African identities inadvertently constituted an ongoing project of resistant self-creation of which Afrofuturism is but one key iteration. In response to the near complete erasure of the past, black slaves were forced to make constant and creative use of their circumscribed (technical) presents and the unwritten promises of the *future*. As Lonny Avi Brooks explains:

Cut off from their original cultures, Africans in the colonial world endured that abrupt erasure by creating innovative cultural and scientific strategies to reassert novel identities. The social death of their origins transformed into shields of sonic vibration as music and the vernacular of oppression turned into daily micro-practices of artistic identity, renewal and solace (2016: 156).

As thinkers like Nettrice R. Gaskins (2016) and Anna Everett (2002) have argued, these projects of collective cultural invention, in order to elude detection, made extensive use of both coded and virtual realities, long before such techniques reached their contemporary (technical) ubiquity. The unique coordinates of social death likewise propelled black Americans towards a constant aesthetic play with those categories of life which existed at the fringes of, or even in opposition to, a “humanity” which had been fabricated in such a way as to exclude them.⁷ This tendency reached particular intensity in the 20th cen-

⁶ For Wilderson, an instigator of the so-called “Afro-pessimist” school of critical thought, this imbrication of blackness and social death is quite literal. Prior to the colonisation of Africa and the instigation of the slave trade, “blackness” was, after all, a largely non-existent category, as Wilderson explains: “...there is a global consensus that Africa is the location of sentient beings who are outside of the global community, who are socially dead... Prior to that global consensus you can’t think Black. You can think Uganda, Ashanti, Ndebele, you can think many different cultural identities, but Blackness cannot be disimbricated from the global consensus that decides here is the place which is emblematic of that moment the [...] person is spun out from social life to social death” (Soong & Wilderson 2017: 21).

⁷ See for instance, Young (2009).

ture, as artists began to adapt the concepts of a rapidly proliferating science fiction genre. In this context, Afrofuturism begins to coalesce around two key science fiction tropes, two figures which designate individuals at the outer limits of humanity: the *alien* and the *cyborg*, to whom we will now turn.

2. “*Earth People, I was born on Jupiter*”

Mark Sinker, in his essay “Loving the Alien,” offers us one of the richest articulations of the Middle Passage as mass-alien-abduction event: “The ships landed long ago,” he writes, “they already laid waste whole societies, abducted and genetically altered swathes of citizenry... Africa and America –and so by extension Europe and Asia– are already in their various ways Alien Nation” (1992: 33). Indeed, in scenes far more apocalyptic than those of *War of the Worlds*, because *genuine*, Africa (like Australia, the Pacific, much of Asia and Latin America), saw a generalised alien invasion of unprecedented and ongoing catastrophe. “Apocalypse been in effect,” Sinker will quote Professor Griff (1992), Public Enemy’s Minister of Information, on Enemy’s 1990 single “Welcome to the Terrordome” –the apocalypse that is modernity has been an ongoing and globalised condition of blackness since at least the 15th century.

And the alienation of Alien Nation goes both ways – making “aliens” likewise of the Africans transported from their homes to a terrifying new world. We might think here of Dwayne McDuffie and M.D. Bright’s Augustus Freeman IV, the protagonist of DC Comics’ *Icon* series (1993-1997). Originally an extra-terrestrial called Arnus, who crashed to Earth in an escape pod, landing in a cotton field in the South of 1839, Augustus has taken on the appearance of the first sentient life form he encountered – Miriam, the enslaved black woman who discovered and adopted him. The allegorical dimensions of this becoming, which ultimately sees him encounter idealistic teenage mother Rachel “Rocket” Ervin and become the superhero to her sidekick, reflect a blackness which is itself the invention of Western (pseudo) science, yet which might nevertheless be recuperated through a politicised ethic of science-fictional-self-creation.

This was certainly the strategy adopted by the entity born in May of 1912 in Birmingham Alabama, and named Herman Poole Blount (Szwed 1997: 4). As his biographer John F. Szwed explains, “at the heart of everything that Sun Ra did was the claim that he was not born, that he was not from earth, that he was not a man, that he had no family, that his name was not what others said it was” (1997: 5). In response to the catastrophe of social death, Blount/Ra embraces what we might describe, in Nietzsche’s terms, an *ethic of affirmation*, taking the lacunae formed by Southern, black “humanity” as the condition for

an entirely new becoming. In October of 1952 Blount legally changed his name to Le Sony'r Ra, later becoming Sun Ra, in a gradual self-invention instigated by his "abduction" at the hands of aliens from Saturn, an experience ultimately culminating in Ra's self-identification as an ancient alien deity from that same planet.

The line of flight traced across Ra's over one hundred full-length records, alone and accompanied by his group, the Arkestra, constitutes a parallel musical becoming, with tunes ranging from the tweaked space-age-bachelor-pad music of *The Futuristic Sounds of Sun Ra* (1961), through to records like *Atlantis* (1969), which transposes a terrifyingly muddled electronic ritual music from ancient Saturn into languid jams on the "Solar Sound Instrument" as it floats over West African rhythmic technologies.⁸

Perhaps the common thread across these sonic landscapes is a certain idiosyncratic "futurism," but this is a futurism which is likewise preoccupied with ancestry and the ancient, in a fusion which aims to displace Western, modernist teleology. As Szwed explains, evoking an encounter with the Akestra in the "high-sixties:"

Even in the excesses of this era there were few audiences prepared for an ominous, ragtag group of musicians in Egyptian robes, Mongolian caps (Mongolian, as from the planet Mongo of Flash Gordon), and B-movie spacesuits who played on a variety of newly invented or strangely modified electronic instruments (the sun harp, the space organ, the cosmic side drum) and proclaimed the greatness of the most ancient of races (this, the Sun Ra of the Solar-Myth Arkestra)... (1997: xvi).

This cultural alchemy, in bringing together diverse image syntaxes –from avant-garde theatre to comic books, from Ancient Egypt to synthesisers– constitutes a machinery of incredible power for reconfiguring hegemonic distributions of culture. This effect is spatial –collapsing the clavinet factories of West Germany into the percussion circles of Mali– and temporal –the most remote ancestral events coexisting with the futuristic travel of these Afronauts.

Ra, the ancient alien from the future, constitutes an invention – a "self-invention," we must steadily recall, instigated by the catastrophic cultural lacuna constituted by the middle passage– yet this invention is no less arbitrary (perhaps *far less* arbitrary) than the "races" conjured by Enlightenment pseu-

⁸ A term borrowed and adapted from George Russell's producer Kirk DeGiorgio via Eshun: "The classical musics of the Ghanaian drumchoir, Balinese gamelan orchestras, Indian and Jajouka master musicians are what [...] DeGiorgio terms ARTs –Advanced Rhythmic Technologies– already centuries old." (1998: 01[005]) Indeed, by a record like *Disco 3000* (1978) Ra's use of such rhythm technologies (both machinic and human, and ultimately best placed in the liminal space between) is of such hypnotic intensity as to render most contemporary rave music positively bucolic in comparison.

doscience for the purposes of European conquest of the globe. As Ra explains, appearing in his robes at an Oakland youth centre, in his 1974 recruitment film *Space is the Place*:

How do you know I'm real? 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. So we're both myths. I do not come to you as the reality, I come to you as myth, cos that's what black people are — *myths* (2003).

Ra is indeed explicit here in acknowledging his deployment of what Nietzsche will dub “powers of the false”— the rejection of an anaemic “will to truth” in favour of the powerful and affirmative powers of myth.⁹ “I am the altered destiny,” Ra intones, “the power of living myth” (2003). The powers of myth, as affective means and hermeneutic for participation in the flux of life, are just as “real” as anything of the order of the *true*—something Dr. Octagon, the time-travelling gynaecologist from Jupiter acknowledges, when he tells us, on “Earth People” (1995): “Now my helmet's on, you can't tell me I'm not in outer space.” Octagon/Kool Keith, returning from space via fax-machine, is “changin' blue skin, my brown colour's comin' back [...] psychedelic this time, come in rainbow” (1995) in a fantastically coloured techno-escapism from a colour which was always already fiction.

As Nalo Hopkinson has observed, in the context of her own Afrofuturistic fiction, “escapism can be the first step to creating a new reality, whether it's a personal change in one's existence or a larger change in the world” (2002: 98), and we must carefully note that “escape,” in the context of the black American experience, has far deeper and more tangible resonances than the “escapism” Adorno or Horkheimer might identify with the culture industry. If space is the place, for Ra, this is because it constitutes a genuine and mythic escape from the *logos* of oppression which constitutes the Earth. But this escape, given the temporal dimensions of the wound opened by the middle passage, cannot be simply spatial, as anybody who carries trauma will know. This is why, in addition to Ra's voyages through *space*, his travel is also *temporal*, drawing on Atlantean and Ancient Egyptian mythos in order to project an Afroterrestrial genius far more ancient and sublime, civilised and futuristic, than the youthful and impertinent European imaginary.

Ra's project, in this sense, embodies what Kodwo Eshun will theorise as “chronopolitics,” a speculative reinterpretation of the past in the service of

⁹ For a persuasive argument as to the necessity of myth in the face of human suffering see Nietzsche (2003).

the (re)programming of alternate futures, or as Eshun explains, characterising Afrofuturism more broadly:

...a program for recovering the histories of counter-futures created in a century hostile to Afro-diasporic projection and as a space within which the critical work of manufacturing tools capable of intervention within the current political dispensation may be undertaken (2003: 300).

“Time is out of joint,” says Hamlet, says Deleuze (2013: x), and while for the latter this *metaphysical* fact is made manifest to perception through the retentional technics of film, this reprogramming of historical temporality is one of the possibilities opened up by the technics of phonography and the mechanisation of labour, which coalesce in the “race” records of Mamie Smith, Marie Cahill, W.C. Handy and on to Bessie Smith, Blind Lemon Jefferson, Muddy Waters and on and on.

3. “*Supersonic bionic robot voodoo power*”

“Tape plasticizes time into malleable material,” Eshun explains (1998: 01[010]), and this malleability means that the mixing desk and the studio constitute ontogenetic laboratories for alternate arrangements of space and time, inaccessible to the human subject in the course of its quotidian life, and impervious to Hegelian history. This is robot music – made by robots and for robots, in a rapidly industrialising mega-state frantically swapping its sharecroppers for assembly-line components. Indeed, the Afrofuturist experiment, or, as Eshun will dub it, that of “Black Atlantic Futurism,” “always adopts a cruel, despotic, amoral attitude towards the human species” (1998: 00[-005]). What other direction is open, given that, as Frantz Fanon so well articulates, the “human” has long been fabricated in Manichean opposition to the “black?”¹⁰

Fast-forward to 1982, and the beginning of the end for American industry, the opening up of a non-unionised global labour force and the concomitant virality of the computer. Afrika Bambaataa and his group, the Soulsonic Force, release “Planet Rock” – their five minute and fifteen second homage to the German electronic group Kraftwerk. Far from the first hip hop track,¹¹ it is

¹⁰ For more on this theme see Fanon (1963; 2008).

¹¹ This honour generally goes to The Sugar Hill Gang’s “Rapper’s Delight” (1979), the fruit of a half-decade of unrecorded jams and block party riffing, however we can equally move back through time to Gil Scott-Heron’s work from the early 70s, or that with the Last Poets in the late 60s. Prior to this the practice of “toasting” (talking, chatting, commentary over tracks) by Jamaican DJ’s goes back as far, at least, as Count Matchuki in the late 1950s, from here we can trace it back to the legacy of West African griots persisting into calypso and mento traditions...

nevertheless the first to explicitly link this burgeoning New York culture to the conceptual motif of the robot, simultaneously launching a whole new genre of “electro-boogie” rap music. This music is intimately tied to the socio-economic juncture at which African-America found itself in the last decades of the 20th century, as Tricia Rose explains:

‘Planet Rock’ was released in 1982 – when factory production and solid blue-collar work were coming to a screeching halt in urban America. Urban blacks were increasingly unemployed, and their best options were to become hidden workers for service industries or computer repair people... What Afrika Bambaataa and hip-hoppers like him saw in Kraftwerk’s use of the robot was an understanding of themselves as already having been robots. Adopting ‘the robot’ reflected a response to an existing condition: namely, that they were labor for capitalism, that they had very little value as people in this society... (1994: 213).

We cannot proceed in this direction without acknowledging Haraway’s use of the cyborg in the context of a feminist politics. When Haraway writes that “the cyborg is a creature in a postgender world,” (2003: 465) we may well be inclined to extend this analysis to account for a “post-race” future. In “A Manifesto for Cyborgs” however, Haraway ultimately leaves the question of race aside, and Rose herself is dubious as to the utility or appropriateness of the concept in the context of black American femininity.¹²

Whether or not the figure of the cyborg –or indeed that of the robot or automaton– can successfully be deployed as a resistant motif in the context of industrialised and post-industrialised labour –much less black femininity– is by no means clear, the point, however, is that black music is by its very nature *futuristic*, taking up the problematics of life at the front lines of mechanised, automated and computerised capitalism, a situation often elided by narratives of black “soulfulness,” “spirituality” and “authenticity” (read as *simplicity*).

Particularly instructive here is the case of jazz. By now, despite Adorno’s hesitations, jazz has attained a place of relative respect in the context of high-brow cultural criticism– a soundtrack equally to contemporary high-minded debate as to elevators. However, it’s worth taking a moment to note the particular ire drawn, today, by late 60s and early 70s *electric* jazz, often pejoratively lumped under the “jazz fusion” moniker. This music, which made significant inroads into the chemically altered popular charts of the period, has consis-

¹² As Rose explains: “I’m not troubled by the cyborg as an imaginary, but by the fact that it’s almost impossible for the average young woman to see herself as a person who could take up that much social space. It suggests a social and psychological containment that makes it impossible for women to see themselves as major actors in a technological world” (1994: 216).

tently attracted the scorn of critics, both black and white, for its “betrayal” of a certain authenticity liked (inexplicably) to acoustic instrumentation. For instance, jazz critic and producer Bob Rusch laments, nostalgically, the moment Miles Davis plugged-in and began his own electric experiments in earnest, on *Bitches Brew* (1968)¹³: “this to me was not great Black music... I cynically saw it as part and parcel of the commercial crap that was beginning to choke and bastardize the catalogues of such dependable companies as Blue Note and Prestige...” (1994: 197).

Despite, however, a hydra of narratives around “soulful,” “genuine” and “authentic” African American experiences, black sonic experimentation with electronics, mechanisation and computation reach an unprecedented sophistication in various fields. There is Hendrix’s incomparable experiments with cybernetic systems, transforming Wiener’s negentropic “ordering” feedback into the wildly entropic feedback of his “Star Spangled Banner.” We might likewise think of another Miles recording, from around the time of *Brew*, an outtake from the sessions for *Jack Johnson* entitled “Go Ahead John.” The track is so heavily edited in the studio that, in Davis biographer Philip Freeman’s words:

The drums cease to perform their traditional function. Jack DeJohnette’s beats, funky and propulsive on the session tapes, are so chopped up that their timekeeping utility is virtually nil. [Producer] Macero has diced the rhythm so adroitly that we are not even permitted to hear an entire drum hit or hi-hat crash. All that remains are clicks and whooshes, barely identifiable as drums and, again, practically useless as rhythmic indicators (2005: 93).

Indeed such electronic experiments can be meaningfully thought in terms of the Deleuzo-Guattarian concept of “deterritorialization”¹⁴ –that operation by which a circumscribed space or “territory” gradually comes to lose its localisation or identity, an unwinding by which this relatively stable zone (a stone, a sound, a solar-system) comes apart in a constellation of new becomings. This process is always political, inasmuch as it sees a habitual or hegemonic ordering give way to the metastable chaos from which might emerge an entirely *new organisation*. The results, however, are not to be naively celebrated –capitalism, for instance, constitutes a vast and proliferating operation of deterritorialization (literally ripping up peoples, traditions and languages from their territo-

¹³ While *Bitches Brew* is often evoked as the first outing for “electric Miles,” it was preceded by the electric instrumentation of *Miles in the Sky* (1968), *Filles de Kilimanjaro* (1968) and *In a Silent Way* (1969).

¹⁴ For detailed treatments of this concept, see the two volumes of *Capitalism and Schizophrenia: Anti-Oedipus* (1972) and *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980), in Deleuze and Guattari (2009). For a helpful introduction, see Colebrook (2002: xxii-xxiii).

ries or habitats).¹⁵

Black sonic deterritorialization reaches its apogee in dub music, which extends and expands individual analogue traces into the cavernous indeterminacies of “Scratch” Perry’s Black Ark Studio –shimmering hi-hats, bass notes from the bottom of the Atlantic, sudden pops of tight-mic’d percussion. These sudden “events” in the sonisphere serve as the catalysts for their own deterritorial expansion to the limits of the desk, the chamber, the Universe According to Scratch– the appropriately named “Upsetter.” “We’re here at the Turntable Terranova,” explains Scratch:

...it means we are taking over. We’re taking over the air, we’re taking over the mounts, we’re taking over the star, we’re taking over the sun, we’re changing time, we’re changing power, we’re changing grace, we’re changing space, we are doing things that His Majesty sent us to do in this Armageddon (1975).

Transposed into manifesto form, we can clearly see the need for counter-myths of soulful simplicity in response to such audacity.

4. *Conclusions: Afrofuturism and minor literature*

Through this haze of sampled concepts emerges another– arriving with the clatter of central European streetcars, all the way from Kafka’s desk in Prague. In all of this, we are reminded of Deleuze and Guattari’s multiple formulation of a “minor literature” such as is scratched in the anorexic hilarity of Kafka’s prose. Kafka, hesitating –like Joyce, like Beckett– over the impossibility of writing in the coloniser’s language, takes a treacherous “middle path,” carefully excavating another language *within* the German of the Hapsburgs. As Deleuze and Guattari explain:

A minor literature doesn’t come from a minor language; it is rather that which a minority constructs within a major language. But the first characteristic of minor literature in any case is that in it language is affected with a high coefficient of deterritorialization (1986: 16).

¹⁵ All deterritorialization, it should be noted, is accompanied by subsequent reterritorializations, the production of new consistent zones, such as we see played out in the codifications of slang and the endlessly elusive re-iterations of cool. Rammellzee’s conception of graffiti as “armament” is instructive: “the letters armoured themselves while we were scattering them on the transit” (Quoted in deAk 2018: 153), he explains, which is to say their incomprehensibility –to those uninitiated in this futuristic system of territorial semiotics– constitutes a deterritorialization of language as a tool of hegemonic culture. At the same time, graffiti reterritorializes the train –civics, private property, the city– turning each into a gallery, or, more properly, as in the wildest aspirations of Italian futurism, beginning the task of *ending the gallery*, as the definitive arbiter of cultural life.

We must immediately distinguish the forms of cultural alchemy we have so far discussed from “language” according to any structurally semiotic model. The “signs” which populate Afrofuturist ecologies are by no means bilateral like Saussure’s, rather catalytic and multilateral, in keeping with their fundamentally processual dimensions.

Deleuze and Guattari themselves will move increasingly towards a mutant, processual semiotics, crystallised in the signs of a “minority cinema” Deleuze will identify in *Cinema II* (2013: 222-230). The essential point, however, is that here we find a semiotic system which is no longer *ordering*, as in the sensible concatenations of “official” language, but which is properly *disordering*, dislocating hegemonic semiotics from within. Such “minor literatures” constitute a parasitic auto-critique engendered by majoritarian processes of subjectivation, such that, as Deleuze and Guattari explain, “everything in them is political... [their] cramped space forces each individual intrigue to connect immediately to politics” (1986: 17).

Indeed, much like Gregor Samsa, Miles Davis wakes up one morning as a fly, or at the very least wearing fly shades (Eshun 1998: 01.007), stabbing his notes into a jungle of insectoid percussion. “The third characteristic of minor literature is that in it everything takes on a collective value...” Deleuze and Guattari continue, “there are no possibilities for an individuated enunciation that would belong to this or that ‘master’ and that could be separated from a collective enunciation” (1986: 17). And it seems here as if they are directly addressing the Grandmaster Flash, who uses his turntables to collapse the collective enunciations of black sonic history in an alchemical interweaving of flows.

The figure of the “minority,” as I suggested at the beginning of this piece, comes to serve in Deleuze and Guattari’s work as a contemporary iteration of Marx’s proletariat— a conceptual and material fault-line which engenders a generalised auto-critique of the very concept of the political subject, and as such of the *polis* itself. This development emerges not only from a racialisation of the distribution of labour –visible in both the West’s expulsion of material production to its peripheries and in the importation of immigrant labour forces to populate the onerous service and “gig” economies, but also in the collapse, through the 20th century, of the international labour movement, as Gilbert Sibertin-Blanc explains:

In the aggravation of the crisis of the labor movement that began with the First World War and the defeat to fascism between the wars, it also made the identification of the subject of politics increasingly untenable despite the labor movement’s belief that it could guarantee otherwise in the figure of a revolutionary proletariat constituted in the dialectic of mass movements and class antagonism. This entire situation,

as complex as it is undecided [...] Deleuze and Guattari condensed in the almost compulsively repeated formula: ‘the people are missing...’ (2016: 225).

The production of collective enunciations then, enacted by minor literatures, constitutes not the articulation of some pre-established cultural identity, rather the always-already political fabrication of a “people” in response to the profound contemporary absence of any such entity— such as might constitute the locus of a *polis* in the 20th and 21st centuries.

And while Deleuze and Guattari will posit minor literatures as emerging from certain marginal tendencies *immanent* to the socius, we must recall that Afrofuturism takes place in the context of that absolute lacunae, the black hole of social death. In this sense, experiments in black sonic futurism perhaps go further than those beloved of Deleuze and Guattari, drawing on modernity’s literal “outside” —those machinic, biological and cosmic forces which have been excluded from the category of the “human” *tout court*. The consequences here are significant. If a politics based upon the discourse of “minorities” can so easily devolve into calls for enfranchisement or a gradual integration into dominant subjective paradigms (concomitant with the necessary production of ever more minorities), Afro-diasporic cultural production eschews this path, in favour of a genuine experimentation with new forms of collective and machinic subjectivity.

African American culture, as a resistant laboratory for solutions to the *absence of a people*, has long drawn on machinic and material forces from “outside” in a complex synthesis of solutions to this most central and pressing of political dilemmas. And Afrofuturism, I have argued, constitutes one of its most pertinent and successful speculative “solutions” to this problem, in constituting new and inhuman identities modelled on the tropes of alien and cybernetic life, implicating these lifeforms in a chronopolitical destabilisation of historical narrative and a technological remixing of space-times. In this sense, the *topoi* of Afrofuturist politics is not that of “reform,” but rather one of a revolutionary materialism, predicated on the most rigorous critique of the bourgeois “subject” as it recurs in the tradition of Eurocentric political discourse. Whether or not these experiments can continue to elude capture (and indeed *enslavement*) by the commodifying axioms of capitalistic production remains a very live question, played out across the very words of this text.

I don’t seek to make utopian claims on the part of Afrofuturism here, nor to appropriate Afrofuturist politics in the service of broader (and often oppositional) struggles and/or subject positions. What I hope, rather, is to simply gesture towards a collection of aesthetic tendencies which problematise some of the presuppositions animating the philosophy of art, and which have relegated aesthetics to the realm of heady intellectualisation and cultural distraction si-

multaneously. The projects of deterritorialization instigated by the wound of social death –critiques of the (all too) “human” via motifs of the alien and the cyborg, a reprogramming of temporality through the fabrication of chronopolitical myths and through the remixing technics of black sonic experimentation, constitute images of what a genuinely materialist, post-minoritarian politics might look like today. It is not for Europeans or white settlers to pillage these methodologies, but to plug into their dynamism in the fabrication of solidarity struggles in the thickest sense: as compatible yet localised resistances to the differentially applied machineries of oppression. Both art and the Earth, more than ever before, are in desperate need of such a remix.

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