

“MUSIC IS A PLANE OF WISDOM”<sup>1</sup>

TRANSMISSIONS FROM THE OFFWORLDS OF AFROFUTURISM

— GUEST EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION —

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What would the 20<sup>th</sup> century have looked like without Afrodiasporic music? This evocative question—put to me during a late night listening session to the “Annunaki flow” of Killah Priest<sup>2</sup>—tests the boundaries of even the most dedicated theorist of dystopia. Imagine the alternatives. While the high priests of avant-garde abstraction might have prevailed—satisfying the likes of Adorno, the Frankfurt School critical theorist who notoriously scoffed at jazz—would there have been much good music to dance to?

Probably not. I shudder to imagine a world without relentless rhythm and transcendental funk. Over the past few hundred years, the diverse cultures of the Afrodiaspora have transformed the inheritance of multiple West African musical traditions, seeding what we now know as gospel, the blues, jazz, swing, rock ‘n’ roll, R&B, funk, dub, house, techno, electro and hip-hop—a red carpet list, to be sure, of the world’s foremost dance musics. Which is to say: music in general, music for the most of us. This is not to say that Afrodiasporic cultures are the only ones that shake with rhythm, or that such musics arose in isolation to other traditions. All of the above dance musics are hybrid forms, shaped by the contributions of multiple cultural inflections, contaminations and crossings. But throughout each is a core component that, one might say, reflects what is also an *Afrofuturist* trajectory.

Afrofuturism, coined by Mark Dery in a 1993 roundtable with Samuel R. Delany, Tricia Rose and Greg Tate, arose to describe the production of Afrodiasporic science fiction in multiple art forms, from music to literature, comics to film. Such works were initially understood as representing blackness where it had been whitewashed from the future. Hence, an “Afro-Futurism”, in which minoritarian blackness in all its forms is strategically projected against futurologies of hegemonic whiteness—so that there is, and will be, a future for the all-but-erased “dark matter”. But *Afrofuturism*—as Dery pointed out himself, along with his interlocutors—is inherently more complex than this. As Eshun argued in his manifesto of “sonic futurism”, Afrofuturism projects multiple (and conflicting) futures through figures that appear to transform not only the coordinates of blackness, but the default givens of

the "human" in general (1999). Eshun's radical approach to the deracination of blackness has led to debates over the limits of black identity, embodiment and posthumanism (see Weheliye 2002). In a later essay, Eshun (2003) described how Afrofuturism looks to the past as well as to the future, seeing the triad of temporal dimensions as plastic and constitutively interrelated. Thus writers and artists such as Womack (2013) have reiterated how Afrofuturism *repurposes* the future, mobilizing futurology as a discourse capable of mutating and changing future outcomes by *reinterpreting* the past—and its Eurocentric, colonized and imperialist narratives—so as to disrupt and thereby reinvent the unfolding conditions of the present. Even mainstream science fiction has played this role—and provides an excellent example—starting with Nichelle Nichols' portrayal of Lt. Nyota Uhura on the original *Star Trek* series, whose appearance has inspired both actor LeVar Burton (in his portrayal of Geordie LaForge on *Star Trek: The Next Generation*) and Mae Carol Jemison, the first female black astronaut in space. These Afrofuturist inflections render porous the boundary between science fiction and reality. Strategic myths of future blackness propel shifts in the real, and crucially, the so-called real world invades myth—with Jemison guest starring on *Generations* at Burton's request.<sup>3</sup> Afrofuturist science fiction appears capable of warping the real: is this not a marker of Afrofuturism's transformative effects? Such strategic operations that remix fact through fiction were coined "MythScience" by Sun Ra. A founding Afrofuturist of the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, Ra developed many of the concepts and motifs still in play today, pioneering electronic and conceptual experiments as a jazz composer, poet and bandleader of the MythScience Arkestra. Ra was also an ancient alien, embodying the return of a Pharaohic deity from Saturn (see Szwed 1998). Ra, who walked the Earth as the "Living Myth", demonstrated the possibilities of exploding the givens (and contradictions) of not only "black", but *human* identity—which is to say, of "identity" itself.

Afrofuturism, then, is not just a descriptor of "black science fiction", but has been mobilized against constraints placed upon black/human identity in general—including its ontological, conceptual and epidermal containers. Alondra Nelson, whose research pioneered Afrofuturist studies in the early 2000s, posited Afrofuturism as a discourse to counter the rhetoric around the digital divide that saw blackness as opposed to technology (2002). But today, with over a century of Afrofuturist artists, works, and two decades of scholarship to reflect upon, "Afrofuturism" has come into its own as a greater gestalt. It is now being put to use by artists identifying with, and thus transforming the shapes and meanings of, "Afrofuturism". It is no longer a descriptor applied after-the-fact, but has been transformed in the unfolding present in the reinterpretation of past (Afro)futurisms.

This special issue of *Dancecult* establishes an initial foray into addressing Afrofuturism both within what has become shaped as Electronic Dance Music Culture (EDMC) studies, as well as on its borders. Likewise, its essays often test the limits of what has been previously thought around, and theorised as, Afrofuturism. Afrofuturism and electronic music are more or less impossible to untangle. The imaginative and science fictional worlds wrought in the electronic music of Detroit techno, acid house, jungle, dub and dubstep are all directly (or indirectly) inflected by Afrofuturist concepts and tropes. The broader world of

dance music cultures resonate with Afrofuturism, as noted above, from George Clinton's funk to John Coltrane's interstellar jazz. But electronic dance music in particular has always drawn close to science fiction, and to tropes of the alien, the android or the cyborg, and to machinic worlds and manifests of otherworldly realms. Electronic music production has long fetishized its machines, its producers as spaceship pilots, its DJs as outerspace shamans, and its events as alien abductions.

Though some fourteen years has past since Eshun published his exhilarating and mind-bending tract that traced the many inflections of Afrofuturism in EDMC—*More Brilliant Than The Sun: Adventures in Sonic Fiction*—Afrofuturism, as a resource for analysis, has seen scattered use amongst EDMC scholars (and for that matter, those in Popular Music Studies and elsewhere). Eshun's performative exorbitance and critical put-down of what he called "CultStud" undoubtedly put off the tweed-wearing among us. But since the advent of a participatory drive in EDMC studies, in which boundary concepts are gleaned from participant discourses and "situated knowledges", there is no reason for Afrofuturism not to be front-and-centre in the conceptual arsenal—especially when encountering the many imaginative forms of futurism, and particularly transformational futurisms that arise from Afrodiasporic contexts and that permeate nearly all quadrants of planetary dance culture. There is also another discourse that deserves further attention in EDMC, and that is race, and the role and force of raciology in EDMCs, and how Afrofuturism plays a role in both representing ideas of race as well as transforming them.

Afrofuturism has produced a wealth of thought. The possible analyses are many. These are but exploratory probes. Let us to turn to the essays.

Populating Afrofuturism are a number of tropes that gravitate around the android and the alien as allegories, or metaphors, for the dehumanization wrought upon Afrodiasporic peoples by Atlantic slavery and colonialism. But are such machinic, alien and androidal figures limited to allegorizing the alienation and abduction operations of slave trade capitalism? In my opening essay, "Vessels of Transfer: Allegories of Afrofuturism in Jeff Mills and Janelle Monáe", I suggest that Monáe's performances as android Cindi Mayweather and Jeff Mills' science fictional approaches to Detroit techno undertake a series of *becomings* that transform the raciological defaults of identity. At the limit, Afrofuturist aliens and androids abandon the supposed superiority of "the human", thereby transforming the Enlightenment inheritance that exalted the "human" only by dehumanizing and alienating its other(s).

A parallel undermining of the supposed givens of ontology and (white) subjectivity takes place in Mark Fisher's article, "The Metaphysics of Crackle: Afrofuturism and Hauntology", where Fisher points out how "white" culture "can no longer escape the temporal disjunctions that have been constitutive of the Afrodiasporic experience". Hauntology, a quasi-concept borrowed from philosopher Jacques Derrida that destabilizes ontological presencing, is repurposed to describe the retro-temporality and ghostly renditions of dubstep. In a concise reading, Fisher demonstrates how hauntology is inseparable from the temporal disjunctions of Afrofuturism and (post)modernity.

The ritual experience of dance is often peopled by exiles from elsewhere seeking encounters with the alien. Wherever this tends to happen, Graham St John tends to be in *attendance*, taking notes during the eclipse of reason and sun alike, and in this exceptional instance, undertaking an exhaustive cataloguing of Afrofuturist tropes and sensibilities in *psyculture*. In his article "The Vibe of the Exiles: Aliens, Afro psychedelia and Psyculture", St John explores how such Afrofuturist tropes are communicated through cross-cultural encounters as the *sensibility of the exile*, revealing hitherto undiscovered threads of Afrofuturist echoes and suggesting the kinship of cultures that seek exile in the alien.

On the edges of Afrofuturism, Trace Reddell undertakes a provocative study of its cross-cultural and "white" inflections in his essay "Ethnoforgery and Outsider Afrofuturism", positing a "hybridity-at-the-origin" of Afrofuturism to deconstruct "racial myths of identity and appropriation/exploitation". Writing on the edges of dance cultures, Reddell also demonstrates the pervasive influence of the "ethnological forgeries" of German prog-rock group Can, the works of David Byrne and Brian Eno, and trumpeter Jon Hassell's *Fourth World* volumes as a conceptual, musical and technological blueprint for the electronic music cultures that followed. Arguing for an "Outsider Afrofuturism", Reddell suggestively posits an outside-that-is-an-inside to the Afrofuturist trajectory of exile, aiming to "reject multiculturalism's artificial paternal origins, boundaries and lineages" by opening up "alternative routes toward understanding subjectivity and culture".

This issue's *From the Floor* section includes a few Afrofuturist encounters that, in other contexts, would merit article status. I begin with the full version of an interview—or rather remixed and emailed textual encounter—with DJ Spooky That Subliminal Kid, a.k.a. Paul D. Miller, in which he discusses his involvement with the founding of the Afrofuturism.net listserv in the late 1990s and the meaning of "Afrofuturism" in his own remixological approaches to film, performance and music.

Turning to MC culture in the UK, Nabeel Zuberi investigates recent developments in grime and dubstep where the voice has been deprivileged in a shift toward hauntological instrumentality, contributing to the ongoing demythologization of "racialized discourses of authenticity and soul often projected onto African and African diasporic musical forms and practices in particular"—but also complicating avenues of vocalizing the paradoxes of postcolonial identity.

Queer Afrofuturism in music has rarely been discussed,<sup>4</sup> and in this introduction to the work—and many dance hits—of disco artist Sylvester James, Reynaldo Anderson unearths how Sylvester's "androgynous lifestyle and gay identity" contributed "to the notion and formation of 'The Black Fantastic'". Drawing attention to the central but at times forsaken role of disco in presaging the dance cultures of techno and house, Anderson also undertakes the crucial labour of refocusing our attention on questions of sexuality and gender in articulating what might be called "Fabulous Afrofuturism".

In closing, I would like to thank the editorial staff at *Dancecult*—and their new hosting through Griffith's University—for their dedicated efforts in producing this issue, and for

keeping the innards of this Open Access and online Journal well-oiled. In particular I would like to thank Graham St John, who has supported this project in more ways than one for many orbits. On a last note, the above articles are part of a larger edited volume on Afrofuturism that has been in the works since 2008 entitled *Other Planes of There: Afrofuturism Collected*, and that will hopefully see the light of print publication in the coming year—Annunaki Willing.

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## NOTES

- 1 The title quote comes from Sun Ra's poem "Music The Neglected Plane of Wisdom" (Ra 2005: 244).
- 2 By the always mind-bending Dave Pires (<http://davepires.com>) as we listened to *The Psychic World of Walter Reed* (2013)—an album I nearly slept on before Kentyah Fraser dropped the wisdom.
- 3 As Lt. Palmer in "Second Chance" (1993).
- 4 Which is not to discount the science fiction (and criticism) of Samuel R. Delany that often creatively if not provocatively addresses sexuality and gender in its offworld scenarios and dystopian urbanisms. However, for the most part Afrofuturist scholarship has yet to address sexuality and gender, speculations by Szwed (1998) on Ra's near-androgyny and/or celibacy aside.

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