



Promises of Uncertainty: A Study of Afrofuturist Interventions into the Archive

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Abstract: The concept 'Afrofuturism' was a subversive offspring of the enthusiastic celebration of the Internet's imagined potentiality in the 1990s by the white technology community. It has since become a multifaceted and complex gathering of artistic expressions, political interventions, and imaginative speculation in diasporic culture. In this article, it is explored as a disruption of the official archives of history that organize and represent temporality for the benefit of the imperial powers that have subjugated the African Diaspora. This organization/representation and its disruption have consequences for the past and the future. The temporal revisionist practices akin to Afrofuturistic epistemology are investigated through two examples: The Data Thief from John Akomfrah's film *The Last Angel of History* and jazz legend Sun Ra.

Keywords: archives, Afrofuturism, Myth-Science, technology, weak messianism, history

A ship departs in Europe leaving for Africa loaded with manufactured goods. In Africa, the goods are traded for kidnapped or purchased people, who are then moved across the Atlantic to the Americas, where they are sold or traded for raw materials. Leaving the newly created slaves on the coast of a foreign land, the ship returns to Europe and the process starts all over again (Walker, 2004). This voyage came to be known as the Middle Passage and was perpetuated for approximately 400 years. The journey across the seas had transformative powers. The ship was not simply a means of transportation - it was a slave-producing machine turning people into commodities by violence and terror (Youngquist, 2011). Upon arrival in the New World, the transformation was in full effect: people leaving the African continent against their will were no longer people.

With this fundamental alienation from mankind, everything that formerly belonged to them was stripped away to keep them commodified: identity, belongings, history and language. Slowly the chronicles and culture of millions upon millions were lost. The displacement was complete; not only had Africans been physically removed from whence they came, they had also had their cultural memory erased for the benefit of the slave owner. As Sartre puts it in his foreword to Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth*, in which he comments on the crimes of the French colonialists: "No effort is spared to demolish their [the colonial subjects] traditions, to substitute our language for theirs, and to destroy their culture without giving them ours... Shame and fear warp their character and dislocate their personality" (Sartre, 2004). Descendants of African slaves of today can track their ancestral traces only so far before



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reaching a traumatic unknown, an abyss in the archives of black lives. This works as a reminder that history is not simply gathered and organized in its entirety. The archives of history we turn to for traces of the past are produced and administered selectively to aid the interests of the ruler, the imperial machine, or the colonial nations. They are a technology of power that vigorously steers time on a distinct, linear path by organizing the past, present and future in a direction that bends ever so slightly, pointing its population in the necessary direction, while accounts of the subjugated dwindle away. A certain debt to the ghosts of the forgotten shapes itself from the ruins of history. It insists on an enduring contestation of the archives that have rubbed out the past of the African Diaspora population and simultaneously excluded black people from normative conceptions of the future. In other words, counter strategies, counter narratives, and counter memories are called upon. Under the category of temporal counter strategies, we encounter Afrofuturism.

The Concept of Afrofuturism

When Mark Dery coined the term 'Afrofuturism' in 1994 in his essay *Black To The Future: Interviews With Samuel R. Delany, Greg Tate, and Tricia Rose*, it was not a sharp new departure. The technological boom of the 1990s had given rise to new fantasies of a bodiless, raceless future imbued by cybernetics and virtual reality. Conceptions of a utopian future characterized by a newfound equality were prominent in tech-enthusiastic circles that placed great hope in the potential

of the Internet (Nelson, 2002). However, what was forgotten in the optimistic discourse of bodiless futures was that not all bodies share the same past, carry the same trauma, or are envisioned to occupy the same place in the future. The information age was, according to Nelson (2002), fundamentally white. The digital divide placed whites on the side of technology and progress and blacks on the side of the primitive and "soulful", which has no place in a technologically enhanced future devoid of strong cultural roots (Nelson, 2002, p. 6). The (post)modern individual (presumably white) that critics such as Timothy Leary and Rosanne Stone lauded was ready and able to live in flux, cast away his or her identity and take on a new one on a whim (Nelson, 2002). The visions of future that are produced according to raceless ideals are paradoxically related to blackness as the signal of the Other that constitutes modern society in opposition to a primitive, racial society forever caught in traumas of the past (Nelson, 2002). This brings us back to Dery and a central question of his: "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?" (Dery, 1994, p. 180). In an era highly influenced by futuristic, progressive, and whitewashed discourses comfortably based on the myths of blacks' inability to master technology, a cry of opposition arose. Afrofuturism was a way of framing this resistance and finds its expression in:

speculative fiction that treats African-American themes and addresses



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African-American concerns in the context of twentieth-century technoculture—and, more generally, African-American signification that appropriates images of technology and prosthetically enhanced future (Dery, 1994, p. 180).

Afrofuturism is a kind of intervention smack in the middle of “twentieth-century technoculture” and the discourse surrounding it, characterized by Nelson’s definition of the digital divide. In 1998, Nelson founded an online community called AfroFuturism, which we might consider the first Afrofuturist archive. Here, in collaboration with other contributors to the listserv, she defined Afrofuturism as “African American voices with other stories to tell about culture, technology and things to come” (Nelson, 2002, p. 9). Nelson and Dery’s definitions are similar in that they both focus on the divergent, Other narratives of the past and future that contest what Derrida calls the consignment of the archive that “aims to coordinate a single corpus, in a system or a synchrony in which all the elements articulate the unity of an ideal configuration” (Derrida, 1995, p. 10). In other words, Afrofuturism, as understood by Dery and Nelson, is a disruption of fictional representations and archives of history that configure the past and future in a homogenous and coherent way that excludes African Americans from the future and devaluates the significance of their past. Afrofuturism is an indictment of the rigidity of the imperial archive. This can be explained by Derrida’s assertion that “[t]he technical structure of the archiving archive also

determines the structure of the archivable content even in its very coming into existence and in its relationship to the future. The archivization produces as much as it records the event” (Derrida, 1995, p. 17). By questioning the archive and how events are inscribed in the archive, by re-inscribing it, Afrofuturism challenges the apparently accepted conditions of reality that maneuver black populations into the future.

It is important to understand that what is deposited in the archive is not necessarily “discursive writings” (Derrida, 1995, p. 10) but general assertions of ‘reality’ that sediment into regularity by way of the prevailing and privileged interpretations of the ruler. Examples can be found in the Enlightenment and its foundational writing of Western liberalism by influential characters such as Immanuel Kant, David Hume, and John Locke, to name a few. In their writings, we find certain binary operations that constitute the European enlightened and liberal society, in opposition to the primitive, stunted development and backwards character of the black, African subject, which justifies their serfdom (Locke, 1698; Hume, 1748; Kant, 1775). While these racist doctrines are not explicitly accepted as truthful today, they continue to work (Derrida, 1995). Racism prevails. Derrida’s concept of the toponomological archive (from which the law derives and commands) is therefore not an easily identifiable place, but an ongoing exchange of traces between an inside and an outside of the archive that continuously influences ontology. This means that an unequivocal notion of the archive can never be



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reached; the final consignment can only be professed, never fully stated, which in turn means that the archive can always be challenged and changed, with consequences for general conceptions of the world (Derrida, 1995). Whatever impressions it has cast into the world can be re-traced, not only to revise history but also to challenge the present state of things that determines the course of the future. It is because Derrida's concept of the archive does not just pertain to past historic significance but is as much concerned with visions of the future that it holds relevance to Afrofuturism.

Eshun has a focus on the future in mind when he notes:

To establish the historical character of black culture, to bring Africa and its subjects into history denied by Hegel et al., it has been necessary to assemble countermemories that contest the colonial archive, thereby situating the collective trauma of slavery as the founding moment of modernity (Eshun, 2003, pp. 287-288).

Vigilantly pursuing a historical presence in the past is necessary, but for Eshun this vigilance must be carried into the future as well, or the African Diaspora population is destined to rummage in history without battling the effects of the past (Eshun, 2003). Power, as Eshun writes, "now operates predicatively as much as retrospectively" (Eshun, 2003, p. 289). Eshun's point is that the African American predicament is as much governed by their place in an

imagined future as their disparaged place in history (Eshun, 2003). This is where the potential of Afrofuturism is summoned as an intervention "within the dimensions of the predictive" (Eshun, 2003, p. 293). Different approaches and interventions into these dimensions of the predictive are what Eshun calls "chronopolitics." An example of this is the use of the extra-terrestrial in Afrofuturism as the alien figure; it quite literally signifies the experience of African slaves arriving in the New World.

Becoming alien opens a potential understanding of time and distance and initiates a way of understanding the African Diaspora's subjects as strangers in the New World (Sinker, 1992; Eshun, 2003). Instead of striving for the designation of 'human' informed by the ideals of the Enlightenment, which were based on the very exclusion of black people, black people should explore the potentials of their alienness, which is a force that re-opens the imagination to possible futures that divert from the schemes of power (Eshun, 1998, 193). I will return to this point in more detail when describing Sun Ra's system. Moreover, it becomes clear that, through Afrofuturism, history can be rearticulated by new artistic formations that inform the experience of being black today and in the future (Eshun, 2003). This not only clarifies why Eshun is interested in retrospective analysis, but emphasizes Afrofuturism's anterograde ability to connect divergent experiences of time.



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To Eshun as much as Dery and Nelson, the power of Afrofuturism is its interventionist dissection of the politics of temporality that keep African Americans locked in a manageable time formed by the organizing of the archives of history. I will now look more thoroughly at two examples of destructive rebellions against this forceful and unambiguous organization of time.

Angels of history

The first example is the archaeological practices of the Data Thief from the much-celebrated film *The Last Angel of History* (1996) by John Akomfrah.

The film opens with the tale of Robert Johnson, who in the 1930s sold his soul to the devil at a crossroads in the Deep South for a secret black technology that came to be known as the blues. This technology was instrumental in the development of other powerful black technologies—jazz, soul, hip-hop and R&B—that, like the blues, can transform oppressive experiences into rhythmic energy. By designating the blues as a “technology,” a sophisticated tool offered by the devil, the tendency to consider technology as something understood through white lenses is challenged. Accordingly, Johnson gets access to a technology from which white people are excluded.

Johnson became available to the devil at the crossroads, an inexplicable zone of potential transformation. We depart from Robert Johnson and jump 200 years forward in time,

around year 2130. We find Johnson’s kin, “another bad boy, scavenger, poet figure. He is called the Data Thief” (Akomfrah, 1996). From an unknown party, he is told a story that instructs him on the way to open his future, to become free of his time:

If you can find the crossroads. A crossroads. This crossroads. If you can make an archaeological dig into this crossroads, you’ll find fragments. Techno fossils. And if you can put those elements, those fragments, together you’ll find the code. Crack that code and you’ll have the keys to your future. You got one clue and it’s a phrase: Mothership Connection. (Akomfrah, 1996)

This quotation reveals a connection between Johnson and the Data Thief. While Johnson sells his soul to receive the technology of the blues, the Data Thief “gives up the right to belong in his time in order to come to our time to find the Mothership Connection. The Thief becomes an angel. An angel of history” (Akomfrah, 1996). (The name is a reference to the 1974 album “Mothership Connection” by the funk band Parliament.) The ability bestowed upon the Data Thief, should he succeed in his quest, is enigmatic and apparently not completely clear to the Thief until the end of the movie. It has to do with time and how he will be able to experience it.

The instructions point the Thief in two, possibly related, directions: the crossroads and the Mothership Connection. When asking about



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the Mothership Connection, the Thief is led to Eshun's explanation. The only clue has led him to the 1990s technological boom, where the future seems pending—or, as Jamie Price, a.k.a. Goldie, describes in the film, "We are in the future... time is irrelevant" (Akomfrah, 1996). In the same film, Greg Tate contributes to Goldie's quote when elaborating on the "digitized race memory" of sampling: "I think what sampling allows for a generation that didn't have access to musical education is a way of collapsing all eras of black music onto a chip, and being able to freely reference and cross reference all those areas of sound and all those previous generations of creators kind of simultaneously" (Akomfrah, 1996).

The Data Thief has found the crossroads. They are in our time, which seems to suggest that recent materialistic developments in technology have brought about a potential new channel in the movement of time, a kind of switch that can be turned on. The Data Thief must now dig for fragments and collect, gather, and reorganize them. This discovery is followed by a combination of images and sounds: the film is simultaneously the picture experienced by the viewer and the fragments and elements that the Thief gathers in his archaeological exploration. Then the Thief wanders in our time and in the archives of history he can access. He travels to the New World, "the land of African memories" (Akomfrah, 1996); he learns new words (slave, alien, sonic warfare); he gathers pictures from the civil rights movement in the New World and hieroglyphs from ancient Egypt; he travels to Africa and wanders

through the ruins of our time. Everywhere he is collecting data to become free of his own time. The Thief's pursuit appears analogous to Benjamin's writings, which introduce historical materialism animated by a strange messianic power, made to catch and connect fragments of time in their historical and revolutionary explosiveness.

Insight into the Data Thief can be found in Benjamin's text *Theses on the Philosophy of History* (Über den Begriff der Geschichte; 1968–), which introduces historical materialism animated by a strange messianic power, made to catch and connect fragments of time in their historical and revolutionary explosiveness. The very title, *The Last Angel of History*, is surely a reference to Benjamin's own meditations on Paul Klee's painting from 1920, *Angelus Novus*, from *Theses on the Philosophy of History* (1940). The aim here is, however, not simply to disclose the film through a reading of Benjamin and thus pose a certain identity between the ideas of Benjamin and the expressions of the film. Rather, the point is to demonstrate a relationship between the Data Thief and Benjamin that transcends the frames of the film and situates it in a much wider political game.

Theses on the Philosophy of History is the last text written by Benjamin. It was conceived from a position of desperation, a crossroad in European history. In the totalitarian tendencies of his time, Benjamin identified a close proximity between despotism and historicism, which treats time as a rigid series of events and causally connects these events into



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“history” (Benjamin, 1968, p. 263). Historians complement an empty and homogenous time with a succession of events; they create a continuum that supports the rule of the victor:

The Nature of this sadness stands out more clearly if one asks with whom the adherents of historicism actually empathize. The answer is inevitable: with the victor. And all rulers are the heirs of those who conquered before them (Benjamin, 1968, p. 256).

The historian concentrates his efforts on recording the smooth progress of the triumphal procession, while neglecting the victims of that progression. This perpetuates the idea that we can disregard the totality of history and instead selectively isolate specific events in history. Considering the progressive accumulation of wealth produced on the backs of slaves during colonialism, the lasting wounds it afflicted on generations of descendants, and the general forgetfulness that surrounds this process in the West, Benjamin’s critique of historicism resonates forcefully today. The legacy the Data Thief has inherited from Benjamin is a quest to destroy this continuum. To do this, it is vital to recognize that historical causality is constructed retrospectively and that any construction can be upset. To see history, to really see it and challenge it, the historical materialist needs to perceive history as Angelus Novus does – not as a neutral alignment of events but as “one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet” (Benjamin, 1968, p. 257). Just like

Angelus Novus, the Data Thief has his back turned on the future whence he came, and he too observes “the ruins, the detritus, the wastelands of our late 20th

Century” (Akomfrah, 1996). He sees our time as a heap of ruins in the same way Angelus Novus does, but no storm from Paradise is forcing him away, back to his own time. The Data Thief has more agency than Klee’s angel. He not only possesses the vision of the angel, he also holds the creative power of the Benjaminian historian – collector of fragments. To disrupt the linearity of history he must catch fragments in their historical explosiveness, at the right time, when “[t]he true picture of the past flits by” (Benjamin, 1968, p. 255).

The true picture of the past is the one thoroughly hidden in the ruins of time. The historical materialist only considers the historical object when it crystallizes as a monad, for this is where the messianic traces of the past reveal themselves in our time. This is where the forgotten and damned of time can be redeemed: “The past carries with it a temporal index by which it is referred to redemption” (Benjamin, 1968, p. 254). When the Data Thief collects or steals fragments of Sun Ra, George Clinton, Lee “Scratch” Perry, Octavia Butler, Samuel R. Delany, etc., in *The Last Angel of History*, it is because they carry an “index” with them that creates a messianic correspondence to something in the Thief’s time, the future. He collects fragments that can explode the historical continuum to which he is subjected. Not only that, the fragments and artworks he finds cast traces to something further back in history: “He is surfing across the



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Internet of black culture. He is breaking into the vaults, breaking into the ruins" (Akomfrah, 1996). What he comes across are flashing pictures of African American history: pictures of slavery, war, white presidents, the Civil Rights Movement, and more. A connection is being produced between the fragments of African American past, our present, and the future (the Thief's present), which seems to suggest that there is a certain force field in our time that contains a virtual messianic redemption. New discourses on alienation and alien-becoming, inspired by Sun Ra, Perry, and Clinton, re-open the archives of history for reassessment and revision, because the once abducted and now forgotten Africans carry with them an index that points to a certain possibility or kinship with our time of estrangement that enables a redemption of the past.

Angelus Novus thus always looks back at history to mend it, and it is precisely by comparing the Thief to Benjamin's angel that we can observe an important division between Akomfrah's futuristic figure and Benjamin's collector/historical materialist. Both Angelus Novus and the Data Thief are trapped in time, but for different reasons. Angelus Novus is unable to stand firm against the storm of progress, which is pushing it away from the past and into the future. The Data Thief, on the contrary, would like to return back to the future, but he cannot: "No escaping from this time. This space. He continues collecting information. Wandering the boundaries between science fiction and social reality. This is the Data Thief's new home. The zone of

optical illusions" (Akomfrah, 1996). Why is it not possible to return home? On board the spaceship, the Mothership, which connects the lost African motherland with Africa and the alien future, the Data Thief's conception of time is altered. Eshun's explanation of this alteration of consciousness being on board the Mothership—that is, listening to the funk record Mothership Connection—helps clarify what happens to the Thief:

Like the unaccountable hours lost by the abductee, you're somewhere and somewhen else now. Memory plays with you, leaves you baffled. P#Funk splices tapes to make you doubt your mind. Collapsing the spacetime continuum funks with your recognition processes. The sense of being inexorably pulled along by the simmering backbeat becomes a rockabye motion which 'swings low' (Eshun, 1998, p. 141).

He returns to Africa with the Mothership only to realize that no return is possible. A once lost Africa and the future, in which he thought he belonged, have been collapsed onto the Mothership and the sonic vibrations of black music: "Funk becomes a secret science, a forgotten technology that 'has been hidden until now'" (Eshun, 1998, p. 141). This technology enables a transformation like the one Robert Johnson experienced at the crossroads. The Mothership Connection is also a crossroad, a more definitive location for the crossroads of our time - a zone of transformation. What the Data Thief sees after



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the “spacetime continuum” has been collapsed on the Mothership Connection, is that the linearity of time is an illusion, which necessarily prohibits him from returning to a singular point in history located between two other points. He is now bound to wander in this “zone of optical illusion” between science fiction and social reality. This is an experience he shares with many other black people around the globe, since “African Americans, in a very real sense, are the descendants of alien abductees; they inhabit a sci-fi nightmare in which unseen but no less impassable force fields of intolerance frustrate their movements” (Dery, 1994, p. 180).

What the Data Thief then finally becomes is a figurative prism through which the black Diaspora can scrutinize its own experience of being in the world. There is a certain affinity between the Data Thief and Afrofuturism as an interventionist strategy working towards a rethinking of history and the future. Asserting that, the Data Thief is not only committed to a journey backwards in time but eventually to a breakdown in temporal linearity that opens a door to the future in the midmost of the present. By following this opening into the future, we will further explore the black, unknown character of the future-space that holds uncertain promises. This exploration is undertaken with Sun Ra and his Myth-Science.

The Temporalities of Sun Ra

Herman Blount, later Le Sony’r Ra, a.k.a. Sun Ra, was officially born in Birmingham, Alabama in 1914. According to Ra himself, he arrived in

Birmingham, Alabama, planet Earth from Saturn in 1914, which quite literally establishes space as a point of origin in understanding Sun Ra. As a point of entry, Sun Ra could hardly have picked a more segregated state in the United States than Alabama, which would shape his thinking (Swiboda, 2007). From Birmingham, he moved on to Chicago in 1946, and from there to New York and Philadelphia along with different constellations of his band, the Arkestra. Sun Ra finally died, or left the planet, in 1993 (Sites, 2013). The Arkestra, now The Sun Ra Arkestra, exists to this day.

An obvious way of comprehending Sun Ra’s claim that he is from Saturn or “a different art of being,” as he declares in *A Joyful Noise*, would be to understand it as an allegory. In this sense, Sun Ra’s notion that he is a “different being” from a different time and space would neatly correlate with the black historical experience of “slavery, structural racism and persistent discrimination” (Van Veen, 2013, p. 12). Unfortunately, this interpretation restricts the potential of Sun Ra’s mysterious claim by having it simply stand in for something else, thereby reterritorializing the creative, temporal effects it could provoke. In this case, his project would come down to a simple “appeal for recognition” as a human being (Reed, 2013, p. 121). Eshun elaborates on the importance of thinking past a strictly allegorical reading and instead buying into Sun Ra’s claim:

I always accept the impossibility of this. I always start with that, where most people would try and claim it was an



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allegory. But it isn't an allegory: he really did come from Saturn. I try to exaggerate that impossibility, until it's irritating, until it's annoying, and this annoyance is merely a threshold being crossed in the readers' heads, and once they unseize, unclench their sensorium, they'll have passed through a new threshold and they'll be in my world (Eshun, 1998, p. 193).

Thinking past the strictly allegorical or metaphorical opens a certain space that, according to Reed, has a political potential that upsets the seeming necessity of neoliberalism; an ontology Mark Fisher (2009) calls capitalist realism. This does not, however, mean that we have completely left linguistics and certain traces of history altogether. Sun Ra draws on grammar and costumes not completely foreign to us, but he usurps any well-established symbolism that assists in their interpretation. Therefore, we must not only accept the literalness of Ra's extraterrestriality but also reject the metaphor in favor of the catachresis: "a figure that invents sense by using figures in a more or less arbitrary name to invoke what is otherwise unthinkable, or unthought" (Reed, 2013, p. 121). Starting from this fundamental 'unclenching of the sensorium' we are able to enter the extra-terrestrial as a disjointed continuation and potential break with history towards unknown space: "the endless void, the bottomless pit surrounding you" (Coney, Sun Ra: Space Is The Place, 1974). Sun Ra produces these fluctuations or breaks in both past and future that collide in the present. An important entity

in this relationship between past, present and future is ancient Egypt.

Sun Ra's Mythological Egypt

With the burgeoning of the civil rights movement in the early 1950s, Egypt and the historical narratives surrounding it acquired relevance among African American thinkers, who envisioned a glorious Egyptian past to contest discourses of white historical dominance and revitalize black pride (Swiboda, 2007). Sun Ra found inspiration in Egypt too, believing that Egyptian inheritance might have played a larger role in the development of human civilization and culture than had been acknowledged in the official history books. Sun Ra's fascination with Egypt inspired his name change from Herman Poole Blount to Sun Ra, the ancient Egyptian God of the sun, which is further supported by the lavish Egyptian costumes Sun Ra and his Arkestra don in *Space Is The Place*. Sun Ra's thought system, Myth-Science, not only disrupts dichotomies of history and myth, science and fiction, but distorts and mythologizes time and future. However, it is necessary to stay cautious when interpreting ancient Egypt's position in Sun Ra's system. What Sun Ra realized, when he engulfed himself in the sometimes conflicting and incomplete narratives on ancient Egypt, was that there had been an ongoing effort among white historians to diminish the role black Africans played in the construction of civilization (Swiboda, 2007). The conclusion to which this led him was not necessarily that a final historical truth had been obstructed for



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the benefit of the ruling class, but that historical truth was entirely up for debate. Myths, man-made historical narratives created with certain intentions in mind, informed our present as much as “truthful” scientific research did:

This was strange territory that Sonny found himself in. The ancient world, he was learning was less a place than a myth. White people who made claims on it for themselves often did so in the same terms as black people. And though they wrapped their self-serving myths in science and scholarship and made ‘race’ do their bidding, when Sonny looked closely it seemed nothing more than testifying, as in church (John F. Szwed, quoted in Swiboda, 2007, p. 98).

So-called ‘reality’ becomes, to Sun Ra, a tool of oppression and manipulation. Dressed in a colorful costume, walking amongst walls inscribed with Egyptian hieroglyphs, Sun Ra states:

Those of the reality have lost their way. Now they must listen to what myth has to say. Those of the reality have been bruised and beaten by the truth. Those of the reality have been slaves of a bad truth. So there is nothing left now but the myth. The myth is neither bad nor good. Its potentials are unlimited (Mugge, 1980).

Reality, or scientific history writing, has been instrumental in denying black people their rightful place in history. Sun Ra makes this painfully clear in *Space Is The Place* when he replies to a group of black Oakland-youths who question if he “is for real”:

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 are both myths. I do not come to you as reality. I come to you as the myth. Because that’s what black people are: myths (Coney, 1974).

If history is up for debate, if it is an object of manipulation, it can also be revised for the benefit of black people. Sun Ra mythologizes Egypt for the benefit of the African American future. This Myth-Science operates at what Derrida would call “the joint between truth and fiction” (Derrida, 1995, p. 40); it finds its material in historical archives and re-mythologizes these material traces. For Sun Ra, it is, after all, already myth in that it is man-made. Inspired by Derrida, we might say that Sun Ra re-opens history, re-opens the archive, to speak with spectres of the past. Sun Ra is not interested in sealing off history, which means exorcising the spectres of history that haunt our present, nor is he interested in ‘redeeming the past’ in a Benjaminian sense. For Sun Ra, as well as Derrida, the ethical pursuit is to stay in the hauntology that keeps producing ghosts that connect us to the past,



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or time in general - to keep speaking with ghosts. By interacting with the spectres and remnants of a glorious, yet incomplete, Egyptian past, Sun Ra demonstrates that homogenous history can be shaken out of joint. Archives and the spectres that inhabit them can be conjured up at any time to challenge the history that informs our present and leads us into the future. How then do we connect ancient Egypt to the unknown future? Let us divert our focus from the historical past into the mysterious unknown - a vital zone of imagination for Sun Ra, who states: "I think some people on this planet are going to wake up to realize that it's the unknown that they need to know in order to survive" (Mugge, 1980).

Unknown Futures

If Sun Ra's playful exchange with the ghosts of Egypt signifies an intervention into official history as it has been constructed for the benefit of the ruling class, then outer space signifies an emancipatory promise of the future-to-come (Derrida, 1994). In an obvious conflation of Egyptian past and futuristic space travels at the beginning of *Space Is The Place*, Sun Ra is dressed as the Egyptian pharaoh, standing on a different planet, saying: "Equation-wise, the first thing to do is to consider time as officially ended. We work on the other side of time" (Coney, 1974). Sun Ra worked in the gap between the invented and now unhinged time and the unknown space no longer determined by this past (Reed, 2013). The gap is what we might call the present, where the emptying of time has been

prepared for the promise of the future. At the very beginning of the film, June Tyson introduces this situation with her rhythmic 'chant,' "It's after the end of the world, don't you know that yet?" As Reed appropriately asks, what is 'it' after the end of the world? Even though the world has ended, time still works, since there is still a 'yet,' a post-time-space, to potentially comprehend the "end of the world" in: "an impossible time that cannot move forward... but nonetheless does" (Reed, 2013, p. 125). We are both inside and outside of time—past the official representation of time. This entails a confusion of ontology: where exactly are we positioned when "now, then, before, after exist in uncertain relation and implication" after they have been collapsed in Tyson's formula (Reed, 2013, p.125)?

To open the future, to keep a door open to the unknown spectres of the future enabled by the disjointment of time, is the futuristic and messianic promise of the unknown that Sun Ra could be seeking in *A Joyful Noise*, when he talks about the present need for "the unknown." The unknown gives no promise of salvation that can be glimpsed in the future. This is what Derrida calls messianism without a messiah (Derrida, 1994). It is a future not shaped by necessary implications of the present, but a future that contains a potential for the coming of the wholly other, the radically unknown and the revisiting of the revenant: "Awaiting without horizon of the wait, awaiting what one does not expect yet or any longer" (Derrida, 1994, p. 81). If the unknown spectre of the future could be exorcised, "if one could count on what is



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coming, hope would be but the calculation of a program. One would have the prospect but one would no longer wait for anything or anyone" (Derrida, 1994, p. 212). By keeping the future open and resisting the urge to exorcise the ghosts of the future and the unknown, mankind, and particularly African Americans, unlock the possibility of other worlds. These other worlds could further open the prospect of becoming something other than human—this, for black people, a "pointless and treacherous category" (Eshun, 1998). Alternative worlds and becomings in exchange for being a never-ending "object of futurist projection" is the potential of the unknown (Eshun, 2003). The disjointment of coherent time ("after the end of the world") opens black space around people subjugated by predictive and archival powers. This option of exploring the potentiality of unknown space can always be undertaken by anyone—as Tyson sings: "We're living in the space age/ We're living in the space age/ We're living in a space age/ No matter who you are/ No matter what you say/ No matter where you've been" (Coney, 1974). Empty space is an open-ended trope of exploration that can never be fully presented, but is always open for further investigation and this dark space surrounds not only white people, but (more importantly) black people seemingly trapped in history. The space age is a condition of all life.

While Sun Ra's different equations undoubtedly signal a rejection of any specific endpoint or any one messiah or authority-figure, Reed is still right to point out that *Space Is The Place* partially inscribes Sun Ra "as the

embodiment of a new social order" (Reed, 2013, p. 127), which contradicts the open-endedness of history and time. To blindly follow Sun Ra's orders would completely foreclose the future to any alternatives. This seems like a paradox: how can Sun Ra, who organized the medium of his artistic output in military fashion with himself as the authoritarian ruler, lamented the backlash against Nixon as a leader figure after the Watergate-scandal (Gross, 1977), and directed a strict form of celibacy among his band members (Bazzano, 2014) be a harbinger of a creative and anti-authoritarian future open to radical virtuality? Marshall Allen, a member of the Arkestra under Sun Ra's leadership and its current leader, crystallizes the reasoning behind Sun Ra's military organisation of the Arkestra: "To be together on the same vibration and to build a thing—that's the discipline and precision I'm talking about. A man cannot learn without discipline. It's a soldier's code. Discipline is the key to everything. It's the essence of any army or any band or whatever you are part of" (Dax, 2014). No army without orders to follow. No army without a hierarchy.

It is hard to ignore the autocratic authority of Sun Ra considering his disciplinary arrangement of "each Arkestra member as a key on a cosmic piano waiting to be pressed" to create the music of the future (Bazzano, 2014, p. 109). Nonetheless, each sound instrumentalist within this arrangement "is a creative artist capable of dynamic, soul-stirring improvisation" (Sun Ra, 2005), which makes each of them a potential cosmic force capable



Promises of Uncertainty (continued)

of leaving milieus of representability and earth behind. In this way, Sun Ra leaves “space open as the term should be, to fill what you want to fill it with” (Gross, 1997, no pagination), making his arrangement something to be transgressed, making a transgression of Sun Ra’s earthly leadership itself possible.

June Tyson and becoming-cosmic

The story is different when it comes to Tyson, lead vocalist and the first female member of the Arkestra, “an all-male orchestra run as a Military Monastery” (Eshun, 1999: 161). Sun Ra would whisper his cosmic teachings to her on stage, which she would proceed to perform “in strictly ‘do-as-told’ mode” (Bazzano, 2014, p. 110). This is a very different practice from the open, virtually transgressive improvisations that the Arkestra’s male members were performing (Bazzano, 2014). Tyson’s voice becomes a representational and patriarchal node for Sun Ra himself, which pushes the linguistic element of the music back into language as a representation of meaning. As Bazzano puts it:

In the words of Ra’s figuration of his musicians as “keys”, Ra pressed June, and June sounded, sounding not improvisationally or immanently, but as the exact image of thought (or echo of thought) that Ra planned (Bazzano, 2014, p. 110).

Here again, we encounter an authoritarian element in the Sun Ra-universe, but this time there is apparently no improvisational line of

flight past the autocratic limit, where she becomes a puppet in his ventriloquism act. This does not, however, mean that the materiality of Tyson’s voice does not carry a virtual force that can be activated in a clash with the patriarchal voice. The June Tyson Sessions is exactly an attempt to undermine Sun Ra’s mind control and re-open the Arkestra’s sonic archive. This is done not so much to liberate Tyson herself but to liberate the entire Sun Ra project (Bazzano, 2014). Something hitherto hidden in Tyson’s voice is activated by freeing it from the tutelage of Sun Ra. This leads to a reconfiguration of Sun Ra by re-opening the “virtual differential potential that always already existed in the material-discursive performative register of Tyson’s vocality” (Bazzano, 2014, p. 112) and becomes an example of a forceful transgression of Sun Ra’s patriarchal voice. Sun Ra and the Arkestra, as a force, carry a potential to exceed Sun Ra as founding figure and re-open the future as a creative space.

What this redeveloped, reconsidered Sun Ra phenomenon can promise is not a final solution, no final messianic redemption of the past, but an ongoing exploration of the past and the future. This is a promise of the future that never completely manifests itself but continues to be uncertain and spectral (Derrida, 1994). It connects Sun Ra and the Arkestra with Afrofuturism in opening imaginative space, not solely to revise African Americans’ inscription in official history, but also to re-envision a heterogeneous future based on the rebellious re-mythologizing and review of the past.



Promises of Uncertainty (continued)

Conclusion

The trauma of the Middle Passage, the displacement and alienation it caused millions of Africans, will likely never be completely mended. Nor should it. The victims of this devastating period in history haunt the present, but instead of exorcising these spectres or attempting to heal the wounds of history, Derrida urges us to interact with the ghosts of history, however impossible any actual and attentive interaction with a specter may be. By keeping the archives of the past open to revision and intervention, the powers that control the interpretation of history never fully achieve a homogenous organization of time. Without contestations and re-imaginings of historical archives, different futures are hard to envision. Afrofuturism accentuates these capabilities and re-envision the future and the past. This paper has been committed to a description of afrofuturistic

temporal rebellion through two different prisms: The Data Thief and Sun Ra. They both follow strategies or systems that allow them to burst the homogeneity of time out of order, thereby creating other worlds and temporalities. Instead of challenging imperial powers by producing new wholesome narratives of the past, instead of attempting to regain thorough control of time, they keep time open for ongoing investigation. This is the radical political power that is transmitted to Afrofuturism. The afrofuturistic strategy is not restricted to a single course; therefore, by describing and engaging with the Data Thief and Sun Ra in different ways, the aim of this essay has been to demonstrate how different interactions and disturbances of temporality can inform Afrofuturism. Afrofuturism should constantly re-orient thinking towards new intensities and temporalities. This is its political debt to history.



Promises of Uncertainty (continued)

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