

Afrofuturism: Blackness, Sound, and Counter-Narratives

Audrey Suzanne McDougall

Abstract

Afrofuturism is about black artists and intellectuals intervening in preconceived and projected dystopian ideas about Africa and black peoples and reframing these notions to highlight the vitality of blackness in the past, present, and especially the future (Eshun 2003: 290; Gilroy 1993: 75). Afrofuturism radically re-imagines the orbit of the Black Atlantic and has the capacity to distort categories of racialization” (Gilroy 1993:76). Further, engaging with Afrofuturist music in particular necessitates a re-examining of the mythic and documented diasporic African history: for the present has had its makings in the past, and both determine the future (Steinskog 2018: 85).

Keywords: *Black Atlantic, Afrofuturism, America, Black Lives Matter, Neo-soul.*

There requires a recognition that identity, no matter how liberated it is remains political.

- Marlo David

Introduction

The term post-human or post-soul can be used to describe and analyze “past and future black Atlantic experiences” (David 2007: 695). The premise of post-soul is connected to black artists refusing to be confined to a single black identity. Instead, they construct worlds of their own, futuristic worlds and sounds that transport their minds and souls to a spiritual realm (David 2007: 695). The vehicle for transporting these multiple selves is best found in “sonic fictions: the gamut of black futurist sounds” (Jonker 2002: 3). Post-soul opens the door to explore radically different selves and music styles that do not reflect mainstream or “pure” sounds in the “Western art music

tradition” (Steinskog 2018: 66). For instance, Sun Ra, Drexciya, Erykah Badu, and Kamasi Washington are Afrofuturist artists who reject classification and alternatively adopt an “unbridled expression of the self” (David 2007: 697). Neo-soul sound has a significant place among Afrofuturistic music; neo-soul is a hybrid of funk, soul, jazz, scratching, turning, electronica, rap, gospel, techno, and rhythm & blues. Moreover, these sounds are in essence political expressions that emanated from the “post-Civil Rights moment in US culture” (David 2007: 698). Black diaspora music within the last few decades implies a “rootlessness” and a “restlessness” that offers a way to make “sense of the world in a subtly but significantly different way” (Jonker 2002: 7). It is a vehicle for personal and collective transformation. In addition, neo-soul is a site for empowerment as it transcends the post-human future and reinforces counter-narratives (David 2007: 698). “Black musics,” as Gilroy posits, possess a special power which is derived from “a doubleness, their unsteady location simultaneously inside and outside the conventions, assumptions and aesthetic rules which distinguish and periodise modernity” – words which echo Du Bois double consciousness, the “peculiar sensation” of experiencing a “twoness,” simultaneously existing on the inside and outside (Gilroy 1993: 73; Du Bois 1996: 5).

Kodwo Eshun, an African diaspora theorist and Afrofuturistic writer argues: “We are what we hear and what we see and what we feel and touch as much as what we think” (Eshun 2003; Athabasca University Afro-Futurism Unit 2019). Afrofuturism operates as an “enhanced mode of communication beyond the petty power of words – spoken or written;” it is sound that stores memories and gives way to other realities (Gilroy 1993: 76). Afrofuturism recovers the histories of black people and interpolates them into a subversive music scene where creators communicate a distinctive, dislodged, and double sound. By aligning and utilizing theories expressed by Paul Gilroy, Kodwo Eshun, Mark Dery, and Erik Steinskog, I will show that Afrofuturism can create new galaxies that transcend the oppression and marginalization of black folks. Through exuding an individual subjective sound, Afrofuturistic music becomes a primary means to channel the essence of social, political, and personal autonomy.

A Brief Note on Americentricity

While blackness is often associated with America, Afrofuturism has roots and branches beyond America (Gilroy 1993). Black cultural creations are often deemed as a product of the residual terrors inscribed within the experience of being black as well as an extension of the intergenerational traumas passed down through the lived experiences of slavery in America (Gilroy 1993: 77). Yet, many black communities outside America share a history of marginality and alienation. For instance, both African-Americans *and* African-Canadians were “forged in the crucible of the slave trade” (Clarke 1996: 3). And many black communities outside of America have also constructed worlds of their own – environs and sounds that manifest their experiences of alienation. For instance, Afrofuturist artists such as Kibwe Tavares produces science fiction films which highlight the African Diaspora community in Britain (Campbell 2018). Similarly, Senegalese photographer Omar Victor Diop takes portraits of himself and of African people to unearth concealed stories of Africa and pan-African senses of pride across the diaspora (Sagno 2018). Diop’s exhibition and art focus on “a reinvented narrative of the history of black people, and therefore, the history of humanity and of the concept of freedom” (Sagno 2018).

Thus, when the field of black diasporic discourse is “paradoxically fixed” upon the United States, it in effect marginalizes spaces for other black legacies and stories beyond the Atlantic (Clarke 1996: 9). This problem also parallels the term Afro-futurism: “the notion of ‘Afro’ hides a particular African-American bias” in that the discourse of Afrofuturism is centred on the spaces and places of the African-American (Steinskog 2018: 19-20). For this reason, it must be noted that racial segregation, colonialism, apartheid, and the enduring quest for freedom are a global phenomenon, not simply an American phenomenon. The power and significance of black cultural creations throughout the diaspora are manifested through kinesics, music, and gesture – elements which are characterized by the “basic desires – to be free and to be oneself” (Gilroy 1993: 76).

Racial authenticity and Americentricity and ethnological questions around what type of black person can make ‘black music’ are highly fragmented and contested issues within the field of Afrofuturism and black cultural discourse. For the purposes of this essay, I will focus on Afrofuturist artists who, regardless of their nationality, have reached into the past to reconfigure

the present and whose distinctive and unique sound, channels a resistance against dominant colonial narratives which work to subvert black autonomy (Gilroy 1993: 92-95; Steinskog 2018: 20). This essay will centre around artists who have used Afrofuturistic music as a propeller in the campaign against violence and systemic racism towards black people, most notably in the Black Lives Matter movement in America.

A Double History

When considering the notions of Afrofuturism, Mark Dery asks: “Can a community whose past has been deliberately rubbed out, and whose energies have subsequently been consumed by the search for legible traces of its history, imagine possible futures?” (Dery 1994: 180). Afrofuturist artists such as Sun Ra and Drexciya have challenged the way that the history of black folks and the history of Africa has been told. They are committed to exhuming those omitted stories, those “deliberately rubbed out” narratives (Dery 1994: 180). In addition, the discourse of Afrofuturism recovers and revives the “forbidden images” of the past to project an image in the present and a concept for the future (Dery 1994: 191). While the core of Afro-Atlantic cultural creations emerged from the atrocities of the Middle Passage, many of the symbols utilized by the aforementioned Afrofuturist artists are African images and African narratives before the advent of the Middle Passage (Gilroy 1993: 73; Steinskog 2018: 81). This reaching into a pre-slavery past offers a new discursive to the dominant accounts of history. Ancient Egypt, as a symbol and a site, is central to this counter-narrative.

Ancient Egypt relates to Afrofuturist discourse because Ancient Egypt is viewed as a technologically advanced society, with buildings and structures that could touch the heavens (Steinskog 2018: 84). Greg Tate, a black musician based out of Harlem, argues that technological speculation “begins with the Egyptians and their incredibly detailed mediations on life after death” (Dery 1994: 210). Yet, black Egyptian history has been distorted and intentionally whitewashed into what we know today. For instance, much of what is perpetuated as Greek philosophy was Egyptian philosophy. However, it was Greece which then became an “arbitrary point of origin” for European history (Steinskog 2018: 84). This rewriting of history can also be juxtaposed against the narrative concerning the advent of ‘modernity’. Modernity, as Eshun and Gilroy and Toni

Morrison argue, began with the exploitation of Africans and the Middle Passage, with the African subjects that “experienced capture, theft, abduction, mutilation, and slavery” - they were the first moderns (Eshun 2003: 288; Gilroy 1993: 178). And yet the dominating colonial narratives have “worked to exclude black people from humanist claims”, and in fact, the foundation of slavery as the basis for modernization has been written out of history all together (David 2007: 696; Steinskog 2018: 85). Thus, African worship and the worshipping of Egypt in black culture “is a way of countering a historical erasure” (Dery 194: 215).

Sun Ra: A Change in Perspective

“If you are going to imagine yourself in the future, you have to imagine where you’ve come from”

~ Mark Dery

Sun Ra, the late jazz composer, orator, poet, and philosopher, carried within his futuristic persona elements of sonic time travel. In an early 1970s lecture at UC Berkeley, Sun Ra relayed a story in which he responded to a woman’s statement that Ra wanted to be treated like a human being: “I did not mean that, I want to be treated like what I am... I am not a human being anyway... so do not treat me like them” (UBU Sound 1971). Sun Ra was born in Birmingham, Alabama in 1914 – although he claims to have been born on the planet Saturn (Farberman 2017; Steinskog 2018: 86). Birmingham was one of the most segregated cities in America, where the heritage of slavery was insidiously ubiquitous, a reality which caused Eshun to wonder, “perhaps Alabama was a stranger place than Saturn in 1914” (Eshun 2002: 4). Sun Ra was trying to reach outwards, into a world unbeknownst to the capacities of man in this Earthly realm. He rejected the boundaries and classifications of humanity and rather nodded to an extra-terrestrial identity, a post-human life.

Moreover, Sun Ra refused to adopt the inherited story of Christianity where the enslavement of black people in Egypt was sanctioned by God (Steinskog 2018: 87). Instead, Sun Ra argued that the Egyptian Pharaoh, Egyptian technology, and Egyptian civilization were African, a notion which dispels common notions and understandings of black African history and European civilization (Steinskog 2018: 87-89). Sun Ra time-travelled to cultivate a sonic imagery and sound

based on this Ancient African past. For instance, on the cover of his 1965 album *The Heliocentric World of Sun Ra*, he is pictured with ancient Greek, Egyptian, Italian, and German philosophers and thinkers: Copernicus, Galileo, Tycho Brahe, Kepler, and Pythagoras, who all appear to be worshipping the sun (Steinskog 2018: 89). Sun Ra seemed to be in a constant dialogue with Egypt, concerned about linking galaxies to African history. By perpetuating a counter-narrative of Renaissance science, Egyptian cosmology, and European philosophy, he subsequently empowers black people to embrace their pre-imperial heritage (Steinskog 2018: 89).

Moreover, Sun Ra's individual and unique sound is indicative of something descended from the cosmos or the distant past. Sun Ra was among the first Afrofuturist artists to use electronic keyboards and electronic synthesizers in his jazz music, which made him crucial to the Space Age (Steinskog 2018: 193). Eshun argues that it was Sun Ra whose music and life solidified a link between pre-industrial Africa and scientific Africa (Eshun 2003: 294). When listening to Sun Ra Arkestra's "Face the Music / Space is the Place" the listener becomes disorientated, unable to identify which instrument is playing, thus the listener is held captive by the mixtures of sounds and beats which resemble something of a ritual (YouTube). The digital music technologies that Sun Ra mixes with jazz are themselves cultural objects which carry cultural ideas (Dery 1994: 212). His compositions are versions of an ancient world sound, encapsulated by the playing of flute melodies, the drums, piano, and percussion (Steinskog 2018: 67). The audience is transported back to another ancient era, or one could argue, to an imaginary future. Sun Ra's music constitutes a statement about escaping identities, classifications, time, and space. He not only employed distant African geographies, but he also utilized different vibrations which propelled the listener to another moment in time. So, what happens when a black Afrofuturist artist travels in a different direction back in time, not through the Middle Passage, but on the way to Africa?

Alternate Spaces

Dery emphasizes that "music must be sought in unlikely places" (Steinskog 2018: 26). Afrofuturist music evokes a two-ness, through polarized persons, humans and machines, it requires a rejection of what is considered authentic and acceptable (Athabasca University Afro-Futurism Unit 2019:

8). Artists such as Drexciya have cultivated an anonymity that scramble and disorient assumptions of oneness (Athabasca University Afro-Futurism Unit 2019: 9).

Drexciya “exemplifies Afrofuturism as a radical re-imagining of the black Atlantic’s trajectories and temporalities” (Athabasca University Afro-Futurism I Unit 2019: 8). Like Sun Ra, Drexciya was very much a product of the segregation and exclusion that was rampant in their city of Detroit. Drexciya created an entire mythology around the place where the Middle Passage, the Bermuda Triangle, and Atlantis converge, to a place where Drexciyan civilization emerged: “Drexciyans are mutants born to pregnant slaves thrown overboard from the ships on their way from West Africa to the Americas” (Steinskog 2018:100; Athabasca University Afro-Futurism I Unit 2019: 9). Drexciya’s mythology is different from Sun Ra’s persona because Drexciya creates an alternative contemporary civilization within the trajectory of the Middle Passage, the place from which modernity began, as opposed to the past, the future, or the cosmos. Whilst listening to “Wavejumper”, one is exposed to the interaction of machines and sonic sounds “like bubbles rising to the surface of the ocean” (Steinskog 2018: 103). The sonic bubbles create an experience for the listener that parallels a “watery embrace’ (Steinskog 2018: 103).

One of the most powerful features of Afrofuturism is the artists’ ability to reconfigure and create a non-human identity, to cultivate an anonymity that invites questions about race and ethnicity (Athabasca University Afro-Futurism I Unit 2019: 8). By creating this alternative water-breathing, black mutant race living in an underwater utopia, Drexciya is distorting the history of slavery, what it means to be human, and the possibility that Afrofuturism began with the Middle Passage (Steinskog 2018: 104). They present a counternarrative that “speak to the intersections of history and progress” (David 2007: 698). Within Afrofuturism, the essence of subjective identity is expressed and experienced in the most intensive ways via imitative representation, the motion of the body, “genetically altered bodies”, and “multiethnic subjectivities” (Gilroy 1993: 78; Morris 2012: 155). Erykah Badu, born as Erica Wright demonstrates an impulse to create an African utopia on this Earth, as opposed to Sun Ra and Drexciya, who look beyond this planet and under the sea for their black utopias.

Unbridled Expressions of the Self

Erykah Badu (born Erica Wright), is known as the Queen of Neo-Soul. She is a black female Afrofuturist artist who rejects confining to social norms and consistently advocates for an identity that celebrates her various experiences throughout the Afrodiaspora. Badu has articulated multiple expressions of self, an act which liberates her from labels and the shadows of racial expectations (David 2007: 697). For instance, Badu works to assert her individual subjectivity as a black woman: “My name is Erykah Badu, also known as Badulla Oblongata, also known as Cerebellum, also known as she eel, also known as Manuela Maria Mexico, also known as Fat Belly Bella” (NPR Music 2018). This refusal to be assigned to one name and one identity is a “practice of exodus” from “white patriarchal capitalism” and mainstream culture while simultaneously reinforcing a complex notion of blackness and neo-soul identity (Athabasca University Afro-Futurism II Unit 2019: 6). Furthermore, on the cover of her first CD: *Baduizm*, she appears as an Afrocentric earth goddess adorned with Egyptian ankhs (Badu 1997; David 2007: 701). The cover of *New Amerykah Part Two (Return of the Ankh)* resembles a psychedelic African Garden of Eden. The tree of life grows behind an Egyptian woman decorated with an ankh tattoo on her back – both of which ascend from Badu’s brain (Badu 2010). Badu’s song, “Master Teacher”, from *New Amerykah, Pt. 1: 4th World War*, is redolent of the idea that black diaspora music has “returned to earth carrying a vision of the future” (Jonker 2002: 5). Like Sun Ra and Drexciya, Badu weaves the histories and symbols of the past to create a multitude of identities that serve her anonymity and creativity in the present.

Sound: A Site for Autonomy and Political Empowerment

“The jazz man must lose his identity even as he finds it” (Gilroy 1993: 79). Mixing one’s identity or making it difficult to be recognized can be a tool for empowerment. The notion of identity redesign, of multiple beings, is redolent of Du Bois’ theory of “double consciousness” in which black people cultivate another consciousness in response to their experiences of economic, social, and political alienation – a phenomenon which persists in the 21st century (Eshun 2003: 298; Gilroy 1993: 91). The “endless pressures of economic exploitation, political racism, displacement, and exile” has not only fostered double identities, but it has also facilitated a sound that is distinctly

associated with “lived blackness” (Gilroy 1993: 82). For instance, the music and persona of Kamasi Washington, a contemporary Afrofuturist jazz musician, exude this hybrid identity – the double consciousness of being an African and an American. Washington states, “music is an expression of who you are, and — at least in that sense — I think I epitomize Black Lives Matter... I’m a big black man, and I’m easily misunderstood” (Shatz 2016). Washington posits that Black Lives Matter is dealing with issues that black people all around the world have lived for a very long time. They have grappled with the idea that “because of the colour of your skin, your life is not valued at the level that other people’s lives are. And so my music is a representation of who I am” (Hutchinson 2018).

Thus, Washington exhumes the expressive sounds of the 1960s and ‘70’s “black-consciousness jazz” where one is aware of their own lived realities and those of other black folks. Washington’s father Ricket - a jazz musician himself - argued musical groups such as the Pan Afrikan Peoples Arkestra, Pharoah Sanders, and Sun Ra not only laid the foundation for Washington, but their music also raised the “political consciousness of the black community in the 1960s and ‘70s” (Shatz 2016; Hutchinson 2018). Nevertheless, “new music requires new concepts”, and Washington delivers an Afrofuturist sound which blends gospel, hip-hop, Afrobeat, electro-funk, blues, jazz, funk, speeches from political activists such as Malcolm X, and original Bruce Lee themed tracks (Jonker 2002: 3; Shatz 2016; Hutchinson 2018). What’s more, Washington embodies the cosmic spirit and Afrofuturistic vision of Sun Ra on his debut album, *The Epic*, which was backed by a “32-piece orchestra and a 20-person choir” but his sound is almost deemed uncategorizable (Shatz 2016).

Neo-soul and electronic jazz are both musical genres within the field Afrofuturism which celebrates and honours originality, boldness, and reverence for the genre’s founders. Like Sun Ra, Washington incorporates his visions of the past and the future in his music. Washington states that the songs on his three-hour album were informed by a “series of prophetic dreams” (Kalia 2018). His first song titled “Change of the Guard” represents one of those visions. The guard manifests a person whom Washington envisioned, a person that imposes his own standards of music, protects it, and works to push the music forward (Shatz 2016). In the first lead single on *The Epic*, “Fists

of Fury”, the song opens with a chant: “Our time as victims is over / We will no longer ask for justice / Instead we will take our retribution”; a rallying cry which doubles as a “call to action” for the Black Lives Matter movement (Moore 2018). Washington’s album is an intellectual expression that acts as a tool for liberation from “hierarchical epistemologies” and from lived realities on the planet Earth (Athabasca University Afro-Futurism Unit 2019: 12; Kalia 2018).

Final Thoughts

Music is an “expression of a language with a message too great to be expressed or described in words” (Gilroy 1993: 83). The musical traditions of Afrofuturism have acquired a special political element in which artists sounds, voices, rhythms, costume, and personas work to portray a contrasting image from the destitute and chaos often portrayed in black societies past, present, and future. Recovering the histories of the past to create a counter-future narrative “insists that blacks fundamentally are the future and that Afrodiasporic cultural practices are vital to imagining the continuance of human society” (Morris 2012: 152). Through the manipulation of sound, identity, and diasporic narratives, these artists disrupt racialization, destabilize notions of black dystopias and by doing so, create alternative environs.

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